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Struggle
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WORKERS
GROUP

The Socialist Workers Movement

A Trotskyist Analysis

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The anti-WWI movement and the origins of Socialism in Crisis

During the second world war, a small Revolutionary Socialist Party was created in Ireland, as a section of Trotsky's world party. In 1963-65 it operated strongly in

For over a decade the rulers of the major capitalist states have steadily rolled back the gains of generations of working class struggle in their own heartlands.

They have imposed savage austerity on the 'third world' countries, forcing them to sell off nationalised industries and abandon attempts to protect indigenous development.

Finally, they have claimed victory over the USSR and are forcing the Stalinist societies down into semi-colonial capitalism.

These historic events have stepped up the offensive against the very idea of socialism as never before.

This crisis for socialism has its subjective side, too, in the failure of all the currents claiming to represent the working class and the oppressed. All the self-styled 'revolutionary' organisations have floundered in the face of the sustained capitalist offensive since the recession of 1973. Division and political confusion on the left are more pronounced than ever.

Because of the centrality of this crisis of programme on the left, the journals and papers of the Irish Workers Group (IWG) have for 15 years, uniquely in Ireland, held up to scrutiny and polemic the politics of all who claim to offer a way forward for the exploited and oppressed. Extended features have been published by the IWG on Labour and the Workers Party, on the *Militant* tendency and many polemical articles on the record and politics of other groups.

Connolly's *Workers' Republic* was the first to analyse Irish society, politics and economy in a period of change.

The present work focuses on the politics of the longest surviving group in Ireland claiming to represent the revolutionary communism of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky—the *Socialist Workers Movement* (SWM). Our many articles on this political current, though useful as a collection, do not meet the need in the present conjuncture for a coherent assessment of their 20-year record.

The study of this organisation's past has the merit of illuminating events of recent decades and the questions of programme and method which they raise for the Irish left. Its central aim, however, is to get at the essential character of the politics of the SWM, asking whether it is indeed, as it claims, a consistent and healthy representative of *revolutionary communism*.

Although 20 years of existence has seen SWM grow from about 50 to only 150 members, it is not impossible that it might become a significant factor within the demoralised Irish left. Since the break-up of the Workers Party they have already boasted that "SWM has become the main socialist organisation in Ireland". (*Socialist Worker*, March '92 p.9). Whether this claim will prove to be anything more than the self-delusion so often evident in the writings of left sects only political struggle can decide.

The present analysis is a contribution to that struggle.

INTRODUCTION

The Centrist Fragments of Trotskyism

All the 'far left' groups in Ireland stem from post-1945 international currents which found sympathisers in Ireland in the 1960s. The Socialist Workers Movement was created by one such current, a fragment of what had been international Trotskyism.

During the 1930s, revolutionary communist opposition to Stalinism, fascism and 'democratic' imperialism was waged consistently and uniquely by the organisations around Leon Trotsky. For the five years after Hitler's destruction of the German working class all the battles of the Trotskyists found their focus in creating a fighting propaganda-party on a world basis. This 'Fourth International' was declared in 1938 and its small forces maintained the banner of revolutionary communism with heroism through the midnight of the 20th century.

After 1948 it was riven with disagreement over how to interpret the unexpected expansion of Stalinism after the war and the ability of the US to create a new world economic order. The Fourth International, deprived of Trotsky's unmatched experience by a Stalinist assassin, soon translated its confusions about events into major mistakes of programme which caused it to fly apart organisationally into competing fragments.

These currents, the biggest comprising about 10,000 members internationally, have oscillated since 1950 between revolutionary Marxism and adaptation to various alien 'left' currents within nationalism, trade unionism, feminism, guerrillaism and so forth. Such confusion and oscillation typifies them, in the language of Lenin and Trotsky, as *centrist* rather than revolutionary organisations.

Centrism was the term applied by Lenin to the political method of the degenerating Socialist (Second) International up to 1914. Trotsky applied the term to the early Stalin faction after 1927 as it zig-zagged blindly between right and left.

During many years of practical struggle to re-found international communism Trotsky characterised as *centrist* many of the left socialist groups wavering between the Second International and Bolshevism. The hallmarks of centrism were political instability and combining of revolutionary phrases with opportunist practice. These were especially evident in movements such as the British *Independent Labour Party*, the Spanish POUM and other less well remembered organisations with whom the Trotskyists polemicised.

The fragments of the Fourth International which degenerated and flew apart after 1948 equally invite description as *centrist* currents. Blighted by opportunism and sectarianism, they have, for over 40 years, kept alive different aspects of the legacy and literature of revolutionary communism, but none of them has ever recov-

ered the consistency of revolutionary method, programme and principle which made the Bolsheviks, Lenin and Trotsky leaders of the first workers' state.

The Socialist Workers Movement was launched in Ireland in 1972 by one of those 'Trotskyist' fragments, the *International Socialists* (now the *Socialist Workers Party, SWP*). Launched in Britain more than 20 years earlier by Tony Cliff, its distinctive programme is discussed in chapter three.

By the late '60s the International Socialists were growing fast on the back of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and increasing trade union militancy in Britain. Cliff's organisation first involved itself in Irish far-left politics in 1968 when the anti-Unionist masses in the North took to the barricades. The upshot was to add one more episode to the long series of failures to root revolutionary Marxism in Ireland.



The IWG of the late '60s was not unaware of the need for an *international*. Its constitution claimed to stand by the politics of the Fourth International of 1938. But it avoided any statement of where it stood in relation to the issues which had destroyed that body. It saw the 'Fourth International' as continuing to exist in some abstract sense:

Despite the organisational disarray which isolation, ideological erosion and the blows of hostile forces have wreaked on the Fourth International, there exists no other stream of genuine Marxism, of working class revolutionary socialism, except Trotskyism. The programme of the Fourth International is the present-day Bolshevism. (Internal Bulletin no. 2, and Workers Republic no. 20, Winter 1967/8.)

This solved nothing in practice given that rival inter-

national organisations with profound differences of programme claimed to be that Fourth International.

One of those international fragments, the 'United Secretariat' led by Ernest Mandel found champions in the IWG, notably Eamonn McCann who declared:

I give notice that at the recalled AGM I will move that the IWG do forthwith apply for affiliation to the United Secretariat as the Irish section of the Fourth International. (Internal Bulletin no. 4., 1968).

The collapse of the IWG in 1968 left this debate to its successor the *League for a Workers Republic* (LWR). In 1971 this eclectic group in its turn was to be carved up between no fewer than three of the rival international currents. None of the key political questions which divided them in Ireland or internationally were resolved—or even seriously debated.

The Year of Mass Action

The year 1968 saw an upsurge of protest action among nationalists in the sectarian Northern Ireland statelet. It focussed on issues of housing discrimination and against Unionist bans on nationalist parades and Republican clubs. Against this background the *Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association* (NICRA) found its banner suddenly a focus for all the political discontents of the nationalists. The first Civil Rights march mobilized 2,500 people on the road from Coalisland to Dungannon on 24 August and was followed by riots provoked by Paisley's Protestant Volunteers.

The N.I. Civil Rights Association had been formed on 16 January 1967 after a public meeting in a Belfast hotel. At its core was a group of members of the Stalinist "Communist Party of Ireland" determined to create a cross-class protest campaign to lobby peacefully for a

limited programme of civil liberties. The committee embraced figures from the *Northern Ireland Labour Party*, *Republican Labour*, the republican movement and even a co-opted 'Young Unionist'. Its demands included reform of the local election system and the abolition of emergency legislation and the B-Specials (Ulster Special Constabulary).

The Civil Rights Association was reluctantly forced by the Derry Housing Action Committee to go ahead with the 5 October demonstration in Derry which had been banned by Home Affairs Minister William Craig. The Housing Action Committee had been the initiative of radical leftists in the local N.I. Labour Party branch, notably Eamonn McCann who with two others was afterwards charged with organizing that famous march. Television pictures that day drew the attention of the



world to the savagery of the Royal Ulster Constabulary as it batoned the defenceless marchers, including public figures such as Gerry Fitt MP, leaving 96 people in need of hospital treatment.

Civil Rights leader Edwina Stewart, also a *Communist Party* leader, attacked the young Derry activists whose "provocation", in her view, had reduced the civil rights strategy to ruins. In truth, the Derry left had no coherent alternative programme or perspective. Its most rounded statement of "perspective" before these events, which is given in Eamonn McCann's book *War and an Irish Town* (Pluto 1984, pp 30-32), conveys well the 'economism' of the left in general which could not see how to relate the nationalism of the oppressed minority to the tasks facing the working class. To quote their own words, the left, in the eye of the storm, could only make "an act of political faith". It aspired to create a party which would become "the natural repository for the aspirations of the discontented". But of strategy or tactics—nothing except support for housing agitation and unemployed action.

As an immediate consequence of the Derry events the *Peoples' Democracy* (PD) was created in Queen's University Belfast on 7 Oct. 1968 by former members of the defunct IWG. Adapting to the semi-anarchist trend in the international student movement, it formed a loose organization of large discussion meetings which often left decisions to a small unelected circle. It adopted a Civil Rights charter with the addition of several points of a "social programme" on house-building, jobs and farm co-operatives.

In time Peoples Democracy changed into a more explicitly socialist organisation with formal membership and its own publications. But it made no headway in understanding the national question from a class standpoint nor towards offering a programme for socialist leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle.

Tony Cliff's *International Socialists* (IS) in Britain was at that time a relatively large organization with vastly greater resources than the Irish groups. It had close contacts with McCann, the Peoples Democracy, and the League for a Workers Republic within which it had committed supporters such as Paul Gillespie. The International Socialists also courted militants such as Bernadette Devlin, though in a manner which never sought to confront her with the need for a coherent revolutionary socialist perspective.

Politically, however, the International Socialists *tailed* the semi-anarchist PD. They created a solidarity front in Britain—the *Irish Civil Rights Solidarity Campaign* (ICRSC)—whose programme they explicitly limited to the demands of the PD group, as explained to their National Committee meeting:

Comrade Palmer reported that the ICRSC set up to draw left organisations and Irish groups together to mobilise Irish workers on a programme similar to PD's in Ireland.

Comrade Lever wanted to know what had become of our demand for a united Socialist Ireland in the campaign programme. Comrade Cliff said that the programme of the ICRSC was that of the PD, which is the only really meaningful organisation in N.Ireland at the moment. (NC Minutes, 2/6/69.)

It was the sending in of British troops on 15 August 1969, however, which revealed in the sharpest way the shallow political opportunism of Cliff's international current. Four months earlier, in April 1969, when 500 troops were sent in to take pressure off the police and to guard installations, the International Socialists had no difficulty in proudly headlining—*Ulster: British Troops Out* (*Socialist Worker* no. 119, 26/4/69). However, when troops were put on the streets in response to the mass struggles and conflagrations of August 1969, when the Six-County state was losing control, the International Socialists dropped the demand for Troops Out.

In the face of opposition to dropping the call for "troops out" the Cliff leadership held firm and had their line endorsed by a conference. In September, still under pressure, they published a centre-page defence of their line by Stephen Marks:—*N.Ireland: Fine Slogans and Grim Reality; The Contradictory Role of British Troops Gives Catholic Workers Time to Arm Against Further Orange Attacks* (SW 18 Sept 1969).

The article attempted to outline the advantages of the deployment of British troops for the Catholics, supposedly protecting them while they rearmed! Yet the same issue of their paper carried a report by Chris Harman showing the real role of the troops—in getting the barricades down. Far from ever giving a breathing space to the nationalist masses to organise or arm themselves the whole function of the troops from the first moment was to re-inforce the conservative Catholic forces and undermine any independent organization, let alone arming, of the masses.

The International Socialists' (IS) leading body, having tailed the Peoples Democracy group, was somewhat shocked to hear that PD, its Irish protégé, was dissociating itself from IS's own civil rights solidarity front (the ICRSC), criticising it for "supporting less than revolutionary programmes". The IS leadership adapted to this and argued:

The whole basis of Civil Rights had changed. The emphasis had to be on working class demands ... which challenged the capitalist system and raised the demand for a Workers' Republic. Similarly the ICRSC had to change. ... we have to be more overtly socialist, in solidarity with PD and not the broad Civil Rights movement. (Palmer, in NC minutes, 20/10/69)

The IS leadership decided its politics on Ireland and its role in Ireland on the basis of tailing the PD zig-zags. IS's own supporters in PD had little programmatic understanding—thanks to the IS tradition—and had in fact liquidated their small group of revolutionaries in the Young Socialists in Belfast into this anarchist mish-mash. A report that Eamonn McCann had refused to join the new "more socialist" PD failed to restrain the IS group in its adaptation to this muddled formation.

The journal of the League for a Workers Republic (LWR), in which Eamonn McCann was still writing, though not a member, summed up in April of 1969 just how much the Peoples Democracy had become an obstacle to the fight for revolutionary socialist leadership:

The People's Democracy deserves special mention because of its avowed 'socialism' and the claims of many of its members to be "revolutionary socialists". ... However its character is basically non-revolutionary. It is fulfilling to some extent the historic function of social democracy, i.e. the leadership of the working class on the basis of left phraseology but no revolutionary political content, analysis, or organisation, leading ultimately to betrayal.

IS's assistance to the Irish left concentrated on the People's Democracy group and deliberately excluded any attempt to fight for an action programme in any way linked to perspectives of socialist struggle. As PD rapidly lost support and adopted Republican perspectives, IS moved away from them and concentrated on developing its supporters in the LWR. Their aim was to construct an Irish section which would faithfully reproduce Cliff's politics.

During 1969-71 Republicanism was gradually winning the leadership of the most militant sections of nationalists, while the Trotskyists' of the LWR floundered, combining minimum demands for the democratic rights of nationalists and welfare demands for the workers with abstract slogans for socialism. They were incapable of recognising the *national* character of the growing revolt and thus unable to apply the rich *tactical* method of Lenin and Trotsky, particularly united front forms of organisation, to link immediate needs to the perspective of a struggle for power. This poverty of theory and programme crippled them in the face of momentous events.

Previously passed over by IS in favour of Peoples Democracy, the LWR built a significant revolutionary socialist periphery of more than 100 young people, especially in Dublin, and began to win real influence within the leftward-moving Labour Party between 1968 and 1970. The explosion in the North, and the sustained class-wide trade union militancy in the South, however, sent the Labour leaders running for cover under the wing of Fine Gael. In December 1970 the party conference narrowly overturned its previous resolution which had rejected coalition with any capitalist party. It now approved the decision of the leaders, already publicly announced, to ally with Fine Gael. The Trotskyists' only half-fought this betrayal, walking out before the final conference vote on the issue. Indeed, a growing sectarian attitude to Labour, born out of disillusion at the destruction of five years of political gains in that party, had already determined them to break with Labour.

Those who followed the LWR from Labour, however, had not been won in any sense to a revolutionary tradition or programme. The pressure for the widest possible unity on a minimum common programme of opposition to reformism and imperialism resulted in the *Socialist Labour Alliance* which, at least for one conference, brought together Peoples Democracy, the *Young Socialists*, the LWR, the Waterford Socialist Movement (local split from Labour), *Saor Eire, Socialist Forum, Omagh Young Socialists* and delegates or individuals from Labour Party branches (later to be expelled by the party). After its much smaller second conference in June 1971 at which Cliff's IS was represented, the organisation disintegrated (SLA News, September 1971). Paul Gillespie, formerly

part of the LWR, and for a long time active on behalf of IS, won support from the Waterford group and sections of the Dublin and Galway membership to form the Socialist Workers Movement which prepared its first publication for January 1972.

The same month also saw the founding of the *Revolutionary Marxist Group* by Rayner Lysaght and others from the LWR. It was founded as an Irish section of Mandel's *United Secretariat of the Fourth International* (USFI). The rump LWR led by Paddy Healy and Carol Coulter then affiliated to the rival international tendency of Pierre Lambert.

These new groups and their international alignments reflected with astonishing clarity the *oscillation* which Leon Trotsky had identified in the Irish working class in the period of the 1916 revolution. He suggested at that time that Irish workers veered between *syndicalism* (militant trade unionism) and *nationalism*. The whole history of the Irish working class confirmed his intuition, and in 1971 the formation of the three rival centrist groups faithfully reproduced the poles of that oscillation.

The USFI group adapted to *revolutionary nationalism*, tailing the Republicans and eventually losing its best activists to Sinn Féin. On the international questions it not only defended the USSR against imperialism but actually believed that Stalinism could become a historically progressive force.

The LWR went through major somersaults before finally disappearing in 1989. Its international tendency defended the USSR against imperialism but regarded Stalinism as qualitatively *worse* than Labour reformism. For a decade it continued to preach that socialists must fight to build an all-Ireland Labour Party with a democratic programme for a United Ireland. Like a stuck gramophone needle, it could not break out of the groove into which the most class conscious southern workers had been led by the leftward movement of Labour in the 1960s. In 1982, it flipped over into ultra-republicanism, championing the abstentionist current in Sinn Féin around Ruari O'Brádaigh.

The SWM adapted more consistently to the other pole of Trotsky's 'oscillation'. It (mis)understood the militancy of workers in the economic struggle to be the straight revolutionary path forward. The unfinished business of Partition would be cleared up by the *workers' revolution*, as would all other 'secondary' issues such as women's oppression etc. Cliff's International Socialists, through its supporters from the old IWG and the LWR, began by winning to its convenient workerist formulations a group of militant trade unionists newly disillusioned with the Labour Party. But it was rudderless in the face of *national* struggle and utterly unprepared for the possibility that Republicanism might decisively hegemonize the anti-Unionist revolt in the North. And on the international question, what could be less complicated than a position which lumped the USSR with the USA as two forms of capitalism and imperialism?

A common method runs through all its twenty years of activity on the Irish left, which this pamphlet aims to illustrate and explain.

CHAPTER TWO

SWM Establishes its Method
1972-74

In the weeks after SWM first published *The Worker* the bloody massacre of 14 Derry civil Rights demonstrators by Paratroopers detonated a nationwide explosion of anti-unionist revolt. Unprecedented demonstrations and strikes swept the country. In Dublin, continuous demonstrations for days culminated in the burning of the British Embassy in Merrion Square in front of jubilant masses.

The response of *The Worker* was to proclaim that "Only Workers' Action can free Ireland". The paper confined all its report of the powerful mass response to a single paragraph and went on to argue: "What we must do is build a mass movement of workers which strikes directly at British economic and political interests in the 26 Counties."

It gave no guidance on how the tiny minority of socialists were to relate to each other or to republicanism or the civil rights movement or the masses on the streets in order to build joint organisations of struggle.

We call on workers to press for the occupation of British factories. Such action would quickly expose the hypocrisy of Lynch's position.

What forms of organisation were to lead such action, or where the movement was to go when it controlled the factories, how this was to link to the anti-unionist revolt apart from 'exposing' the Taoiseach of the day, we are not told. This, the entire coverage of the events, shared the front page with two stories of redundancies. The main feature in this paper (directly after Bloody Sunday) was a campaign of opposition to joining the European Common Market.

SWM recognised, formally, the importance of struggle against imperialism given that:

it is the Irish working class and small farmers who bear the load of this imperialist domination. The contrast between Ireland, a neo-colony, and the Western capitalist countries is especially glaring: North and South. (What we stand for, in *The Worker*, Jan '72 - Feb '74).

This theme was emphasized again and again in the early issues. A feature on international capitalism concluded, somewhat mechanically:

Ireland is more subject now to foreign exploitation than it ever was under British rule. British rule allowed the development of a class of national capitalists who saw their advantage in separation from the UK. International capitalism destroyed, or is in the process of destroying this class. The answer to international capitalism is not, as many republicans maintain, a return to national capitalism, but the establishment of a Workers Republic. (No. 9, November 1972)

But what politics did SWM propose to link the issues of the moment to that maximum goal? A programme of 36 slogans appeared in each issue. The most detailed were the economic demands, centring on the call for "rank and file control and socialist leadership of the unions".

The demands relating to the struggle in the northern state included the action goals of "extension of the Civil Resistance Campaign in the Six Counties" and "defence of working class areas against military and sectarian attacks". On women's oppression, the programme had nothing to say on divorce, contraception or abortion, simply calling for "equal pay for women; full social equality for women; 24-hour nurseries".

How these demands were to be fought for by working class forces; what kind of bodies, under whose control should defend the anti-unionist areas; how the advanced workers should relate to non-working class forces; or what perspective could link these struggles to the struggle for the Workers Republic—none of these were expanded in the pages of *The Worker*.

In later chapters we analyse the politics of the SWM on each of the key questions of the anti-imperialist struggle, economic struggle and women's oppression. Right from the start, however, despite the significant turnover of members and leaders, a definite method already appears, reflecting that of the International Socialists, but accommodating to the spontaneous consciousness of Irish worker activists even though increasingly failing to recruit them.

the worker

JANUARY 1972

NEWSPAPER OF THE SOCIALIST WORKERS' MOVEMENT

Price 3s

Political repression, rents, unemployment

NOW FIGHT BACK

Attlee, Minister of Safety has threatened statutory sentences for political offenders under the new Anti-Socialist Law. This will increase rents in the Twenty Six Counties.

One year ago last anniversary during the 'Bad Friday' it never stopped us to conquer against the state. We faced a terrible threat and we fought to defend the threat.

On 1st August 1971, London brought in legislation on the North with the Heath government. In London again, the press was on London to the same effect that it would be partially implemented to make it easier for the British Army to recruit in the South and to prevent movement across the border. The press was on London to the effect that he could not.

London was on London to the effect that the Lynch government is prepared to take action. Central Council has prepared a statement to be read at the meeting held below. We refuse on the South to be beaten by the British Army.

British Army in London to the effect that we accept state violence against workers.

LYNCH

Lynch need not introduce legislation to do the job of others. Already workers have been forced for offences under the Firearms Act. The course of action is to do the job of others.

Meanwhile, the British Army is opening another front in the South.

Co Derry continuing to our interests as main instrument of repression.

British Army in London to the effect that

automobiles are making minute the workers who are fighting to defend the workers on they want.

Given that it was a special interest

workers brought to trial, this was

what bringing people to trial means in the

for persisting one copy of a republican

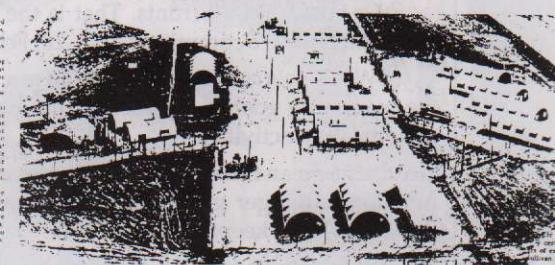
The given reality is that workers

need to be prepared to defend

their interests. But it is not always

different reason for being about. When

the definition of the workers are forced



Concentration Camps - 1972

about 40 per cent in some places. In

places unemployment is over 40,000.

In the last five years unemployment has actually

fallen by 12,000. That is, there were

10,000 new workers in the last five years.

England has been failing steadily in the

area of mass unemployment.

Mass unemployment has been

going on in the North. It is now

20,000 in the North. It is now

Mobilising Rank and File Workers

On the economic front, for example, which was the centre of SWM's concerns, their first three years saw the sharpest turn by the union bureaucracy towards wage restraint, the most united opposition by militant trade unionists, inflation up to 24% in one year and mass factory closures.

The Worker in 1972 hardly went beyond educating militants as to the bread-and-butter arguments against the National Wages agreement. In 1973 the bureaucracy was powerfully set back when the Dublin Shop Stewards Committee successfully mobilised workers to reject the initial proposals in a national ballot. Although SWM gave its support to the Shop Stewards' campaign from the start, it still failed to propagandise for the building of a self-organised *rank and file movement* as a general tactical slogan for the mass of organised workers to move onto the road of *anti-capitalist* struggle.

It did not try to explain to advanced militants what had to be the steps to link trade union militancy to political anti-capitalist struggle. In its analysis of the initial victory, after the national Shop Stewards Conference of January 1974, *The Worker* posed the issue but then answered it by counterposing the party to the self-organised movement of the rank and file:

The very existence and development of the shop stewards' committees demonstrates that there is a political vacuum to be filled as well as an industrial trade union vacuum. Many of the discussions hinge on essentially political questions, and if the government tries to manoeuvre its way to buy off the trade union leadership or curb militants, then it will require a political response. With a clear view of an alternative society where the workers own and control the wealth it is easier to sustain an effort to build up the working class' independent strength on the job and in the union. And where that independent strength must eventually lead if any gains are to be consolidated—is to the building of a working class socialist organisation which can prepare to take on the bosses on all fronts. That is the struggle to which we are committed. (No. 20, Feb. 1974, p.3)

SWM's political response is to offer a 'clear view' of the maximum goal of socialism to enthuse militants in their existing activism.

In the mean time, 'rank and file movements' should function as ginger groups in the unions, fighting for democracy and keeping the 'pressure' on the leaders. In February 1974 the union bureaucracy pulled out all the stops in a second ballot and got a 'mandate' for a revised National Wage Agreement. *The Worker* reported that the Shop Stewards Committee intended to remain in existence. It argued for

groups to be formed within the different unions to organise the rank and file discontent that so obviously exists, and which keeps bursting out in an unorganised way. The time is NOW to set up these groups and start producing bulletins for members of the various unions to keep them informed about what's going on—because the union leaders won't do it.

Under the impact of the mobilisations against the National Wage Agreement, SWM had been pushed into making its slogan for 'rank and file control' more concrete. None of the key points of its action programme for trade union militants, even if taken up and fought for, would have fundamentally challenged the rule of capitalism.

At root it believed that existing wage-militancy, if generalised and stepped up, would of itself make the economic struggle into a revolutionary political movement. When such struggles were clearly failing, it consoled itself that all would be different after the revolutionary party had *first* been built. In either case it failed to spell out to militants what needed to be fought for to ensure that existing struggles would lead workers towards the perspective of working class power.

Reformism and the Labour Party

After 16 years in office the Fianna Fáil party was ousted in the general election of March 1973 by the 'national coalition' of Fine Gael and Labour. Despite dropping from 17% to 14% of the vote, Labour increased its seats and took several ministries. The political importance of the election was heightened by the context of anti-unionist revolt, internment, repression north and south, major economic attacks by the bosses, and workers' continued militancy.

Throughout the 1960s the Labour Party had increased its support among workers. The young left wing of the party largely abandoned it in 1970-71 when the parliamentary party once more turned back to Coalition. (A reformist left wing around Merrigan and Browne stayed on to fight the leadership, and after 1972 Militant in Britain helped set up a fraternal tendency in the Irish Labour Party.)

The reaction of the Irish left to Labour in 1970 was not unique. Internationally, events in the 1960s had pushed reformist political organisations leftwards and *centrist* currents had generally formed uncritical political blocs with left labour leaders and programmes. Disillusion with labour and social democratic parties set in after the upheavals of 1968-71 right across Europe. Now reformist parties were execrated by the centrist groups, some of whom had even been 'deep entrists' in reformist parties. Believing reformism to be irrelevant many now counterposed directly the building of the 'revolutionary party'.

SWM reflected this swing to a one-sided rejection of Labour. The 1973 election merited a huge headline in the election issue—'No Choice, No Change', but only a few paragraphs of comment, and no call for even *critical* support for Labour as against the openly capitalist parties. The Labour Party merited only a passing mention as a party of treachery. But SWM was prepared to call for votes for other 'lefts' if they should stand. Labour's pro-Coalition politics was decisive for SWM; its significance as a focus for workers was ignored.

A decade later, following the reconsiderations by Cliff in Britain and other centrist tendencies internationally, SWM would find it possible once more to call for critical support for Labour. Throughout all these twists and turns, however, the *method* used to decide the posi-

tion in 1973 would remain the same for future elections— tailing whatever looked 'left' at the time but failing to recognise or confront the illusions of the most active workers in reformism.

'Mass' Appeal or Revolutionary Propaganda?

On all these fronts of struggle there is a common pattern—a refusal to argue for the kind of tactics that could link independent working class action around immediate issues to the perspective of workers power. Confronted with other forces taking the initiative, SWM tended to tail them while fishing for recruits to the future party. This was no accident of inexperience. As was to be shown once it was opposed in 1974, this method was sustained by the politics of Cliff's International Socialists.

With about 50 members in four towns (Dublin, Waterford, Galway and Belfast) and a monthly eight-page paper, the politics of SWM were rarely to be tested in actually leading struggles. But neither were their methods to be critically evaluated in *debate* on theory, programme, strategy and tactics.

The failure to publish a theoretical journal reflected this political poverty. Nor was there a coherent and independent-minded leadership confident of its own perspectives. SWM soon suffered the loss or inactivity of founding members such as Ken Quinn and Paul Gillespie,

and several intellectuals and writers failed to stay with the organisation. Eamonn McCann, who wrote for the papers of the International Socialists and occasionally for SWM, did not join the organisation until after 1981.

The organisation began its life without a manifesto of where it had come from, or a defence of what distinguished its method and programme from other tendencies. It proceeded from the start to publish a 'popular' paper, to the exclusion of an in-depth propaganda and discussion journal. It believed that the way to build a revolutionary socialist party was to directly address a wide layer of workers with simplified ideas and slogans that suggested only the manageable steps forward beyond their immediate consciousness.

It recruited activists on a minimum basis of understanding, and trained them into the general outlook and simplified doctrines of the International Socialists, offering little collective support for critical study of political struggle as analysed by Trotsky, Lenin or Marx, and no education at all in political economy. The disputed questions that divide the 'Trotskyist' left were portrayed as the sectarian fetishes of a fossilised 'orthodoxy'. Their tradition, by contrast, was 'creative', not hidebound by tradition, not quoting from 'old volumes' etc.

SWM accepted from its foundation all the doctrines of the International Socialists, now the Socialist Workers Party, without independent theoretical consideration.

CHAPTER THREE

The Politics of the SWP

Tony Cliff's *Socialist Workers Party* began as the *Socialist Review Group* inside the British Labour Party publishing the journal *Socialist Review* (SR) from November 1950. (Later it was to become the *International Socialists* before becoming to-day's SWP). It emerged some three years after the start of the Cold War, an event which also marked Cliff's final break from the Fourth International. To this day the leaders of the SWP delight in ridiculing the failure of the Fourth International to come to terms with the new world order of that period.

Certainly, the majority of the Fourth International was unable to recognise either that Stalinism had been strengthened or that imperialist capitalism, led by the US, was set for a sustained period of economic recovery. It was also the case after 1948 that the International revised Trotsky's critique of Stalinism and began instead to attribute a 'revolutionary' potential to the Stalinist bureaucracy under certain conditions.

Cliff's view, however, that the Soviet bureaucracy was a long-lasting stable new class, that Russia was 'state capitalist' and that the world had been divided into two giant capitalist camps provided no better a view of the post-war world. He shared with the degenerating International the belief in an imminent "Third World War". Whereas the decayed International tended to capitulate



Tony Cliff

Andrew Wiard (Report)

to Stalinism and to petit bourgeois nationalist currents, Cliff's programme led to capitulating to capitalist imperialism under the pretence of standing in a "third camp" equally opposed to the USA and USSR.

According to the early *Socialist Review*, both Truman's America and Stalin's Russia were being propelled by the same motive force. Conflict between these "two imperialisms" threatened humankind with the direct

prospect of atomic world war:

The 'Peace' Campaign of Stalin's Russia is no less hypocritical than Truman's 'Defence of Democracy' ... in their mad rush for profit, for wealth, the two gigantic imperialist powers are threatening humanity with the terrible suffering of atomic war. (*Socialist Review*, vol 1, no. 1, Nov 1950).

The Cliffites thus accepted the view that the Stalinist bureaucracy was an expansionist class set on global domination at the expense of Truman's America. This retailing of Cold War propaganda was the constant refrain of his Socialist Review Group (SRG) through the early 1950s. In 1954 it was declaring that the two powers were driven towards war with each other by their respective economic problems. Over-production was increasingly presenting US capitalism with a stark choice:

Slump or war are the two alternatives facing western monopoly capitalism, and faced with this choice, there is no doubt what the ruling classes of the west will choose. (SR vol 3, no. 7)

Notwithstanding that the Soviet Union was supposedly capitalist also and propelled by the same laws of motion as the USA, the USSR was depicted as heading to war for different reasons. Underproduction and economic shortages were driving the Soviet bureaucracy towards war by making a grab for Western Europe ever more attractive to the Kremlin:

The crisis of underproduction pushes Moscow to imperialist expansion. How magnificent the dream of establishing SAGs or mixed companies in Western Europe! (*ibid.*)

When Soviet withdrawal from Austria, in exchange for promises of neutrality on the part of the Austrian bourgeoisie, directly contradicted Cliff's idea of Soviet 'expansionism', the journal argued that this was only a temporary turn occasioned by the events in China: China's need for steel may still push the Kremlin to invade Western Europe later, so *Socialist Review* claimed.

In fact their belief that the USSR was 'state capitalist' and an expansionist imperialist power gave rise to a false understanding of Stalinism in general. All the evidence, from Stalin's foreign policy and the USSR's attitude to revolutionary situations which threatened capitalist rule, revealed a very different role to that ascribed by Cliff.

Far from being an expansionist force at loggerheads with the USA, the Soviet bureaucracy demonstrated in the post-war years that it was bent on compromise with the imperialist bourgeoisie in order to create a stable world order hostile to any form of workers' revolution. This it needed to safeguard its own privileges in a society where bureaucratic 'planning' made it incapable of economic competition on the world market—contrary to Cliff's theory.

Not only did Soviet withdrawal from Austria contradict Cliff's schemas, but in both Greece and Indo-China Stalin demonstrated his intention of maintaining his pact with US on "spheres of influence" by undermining the struggle against western imperialism. In Eastern Europe capitalism was kept in existence after the war. The bourgeois character of the Buffer states was maintained and no steps taken to make Stalinist control permanent until after Truman's offensive in 1947.

The "Truman Doctrine", promising military intervention anywhere in the world "threatened by communism", combined with the economic offensive of Marshall Aid, for Eastern as well as Western Europe, faced the Soviet Union with a choice. On the one hand it could retreat from Eastern Europe, thus massively weakening its own position in the face of an imperialist offensive to drive out the Stalinists. Alternately it could extirpate the agents of international capitalism within the Buffer Zone by liquidating capitalism and the bourgeoisie from above in each of the East European countries. It chose the latter, not out of an expansionist drive but perforce to protect its own heartland—oppressing the working class in the process.

Even during the height of the Cold War offensive, Stalin demonstrated that he had no desire to overthrow capitalist property relations even in favour of what Cliff calls 'state capitalism'. The USSR proposed for Germany a similar deal to the Austrian settlement—a re-unified, capitalist, but disarmed and 'neutral' country. And until the eleventh hour Stalin repeatedly advised Mao against toppling Chiang Kai Shek's disintegrating regime.

The Third Camp

None of this fitted with the Socialist Review Group's schema of soviet 'state capitalist' expansionism; but their analysis did suit a group which wanted to swim with the tide in Cold War Britain. The political consequence of this view for the Socialist Review Group was that a conflict between the USA and the USSR was a conflict between two imperialisms and as such it was necessary to adopt a position of neutrality in the conflicts between them. In fact SR's pages were heavily weighted towards anti-Soviet propaganda during this period, with a regular series of articles from Tony Cliff on the miseries of life in the USSR.

This neutrality took the form of a commitment to building a "Third Camp"—a slogan shared with the Labour Party *Tribune* group. The slogan "Neither Washington nor Moscow" suited the prejudices of the left reformist current in the Labour Party, in which they were immersed.

Although the Cliffites pulled back from the trajectory of these other Third Campists, they nevertheless ended up refusing support to genuine struggles against imperialism where Stalinist leaderships were involved. They never developed slogans and tactics to combine unconditional support for anti-imperialist struggle with mobilisation of the working masses against Stalinist counter-revolution.

Neutral in the Korean War

At the end of the Second imperialist war, Soviet and US forces occupied Korea. "Committees of Preparation for National Independence" mushroomed north and south, mainly under the Stalinists. They created an All-Korea People's Republic government on 6 Sept. 1945 but the US refused to recognise it. Washington set up a rival government under the despised émigré rightist Syngman Rhee. The ensuing conflict between the North,

backed by the USSR and the South backed by the US was a form of civil war in which the northern Stalinist regime led the forces fighting imperialism and its agents.

When war broke out in June 1950 and the northern armies overran the South, it should not have been difficult for revolutionaries to see which side they were on. They should have been for a victory of the North against the Rhee puppet regime and its US backers. And when the USA poured troops in under the cloak of a UN peace keeping force it should have been easier for any socialist not blinded by cold war anti-communist hysteria to know what side to take. Defending North Korea and seeking to win the leadership of the Korean masses away from Stalinism were complementary, not contradictory, tasks for socialists.

The SRG attacked those who took the side of North Korea, arguing that "Russia no less than the USA, is imperialist and bent on world domination". It followed that...

We can, therefore, give no support to either camp since the war will not achieve the declared aims of either side. Further, so long as the two governments are what they are, viz, puppets of the two big powers, the Korean socialists can give no support to their respective puppet governments. (SR no. 2, January 1951).

This was not the inadvertent blunder of an inexperienced fledgling organisation. It flowed logically from the theory that the USSR was a new form of capitalism. The SRG drew exactly the same conclusion in the similar conflict in Vietnam between Stalinist led anti-imperialist forces under Ho Chi Minh against Bao-Dai, the puppet of imperialism. In February 1952 the SRG printed and entirely endorsed a statement from *La Lutte* which declared:

In Korea, the war continues in spite of the parties for an armistice in which, of course, the Korean people have no say. In Vietnam, likewise, the war continues and the people vomit with disgust at both Bao-Dai, the tool of the colonialists, and at Ho Chi Minh, the agent of Stalin. (SR no. 7, Feb 1952).

Cuba's Revolution

Faced with a total US blockade, the revolutionary nationalist Castro regime in 1960-63 was compelled to expropriate US and then native capitalist property in Cuba. The only economic basis on which his regime could survive (short of an economy under workers democratic control) was bureaucratic centralised regulation and by large-scale external aid. This option only became possible because Castro's needs coincided with the global strategy of the USSR at that moment, unlike in the Nicaraguan revolution 20 years later. Castro reluctantly took this road of liquidating capitalism in Cuba, but making sure that the working class should be firmly tied down in the process.

Aid from the USSR was extended entirely out of self-interest on the Kremlin's part. Kruschev sought to limit the Cuban revolution and to use it as a lever on the USA. He was determined to succeed, where Stalin failed, in forcing the West into 'peaceful coexistence', even hoping

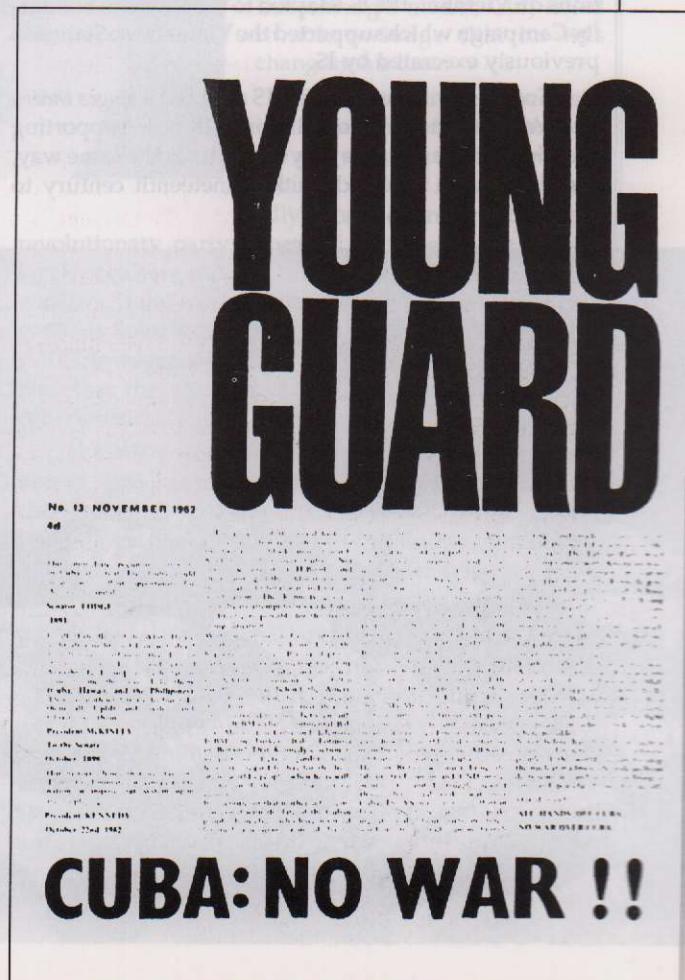
to end the economic isolation of the USSR which was imposing crippling limits on Soviet economic development.

The Cliffites interpreted Soviet economic aid to the blockaded Castro regime as evidence that a dynamic Soviet state capitalism was now ready to do battle for the markets of US imperialism! Cliff's *International Socialism* journal ran an editorial under the title "From Cold War to Price War" in which Soviet aid to India and Russian oil for Cuba were seen as "the harbinger of mighty economic giants of capital on either side of the Iron Curtain". Mirroring Kruschev's pompous fantasies about the USSR being poised to outstrip the west economically, the editors continued:

There seems to be a growing realisation that Russia is beginning to present an economic challenge to western capitalism potentially far more persuasive and threatening than the politico-military challenge of recent years. (*International Socialism* no. 3, Autumn 1960)

The theory of "state capitalism" desperately needed evidence of such *economic* competition between East and West to sustain it. None ever emerged, least of all in Cuba. But, as before, the logic of state capitalism led the Cliffites again to turn their back on those struggling against U.S. imperialism. As soon as the Castroites looked to Soviet aid in order to defend themselves, Cliff & Co. deserted the Cuban revolution.

To cover their retreat, Sergio Junco wrote a series of articles in the IS paper in the Labour Party Young Socialists, concluding that Cuba was becoming a "state and society which is less progressive than, say, liberal democracy, since in the latter the popular forces are able to



organise and actively work for the earliest possible substitution of the system" (Cuba and Socialism, in *Young Guard* No. 4, December 1961). Junco was defended by leading IS members, notably by Paul Foot, against the criticism which he drew.

The USSR threatened to move nuclear missiles to Cuba in 1962 when Castro had little defence against the kind of US aggression recently demonstrated in the Bay of Pigs invasion. In this situation, however, Cliff's International Socialists fulminated with liberal pacifist rage. The Cuban events, we are told, in abstract moral tones, had "laid the myth that rocketry on one side of the curtain is somehow more humane and defensible than it is on the other" (*Cuban Lessons* in IS 10, winter 62-62).

The unconditional defence of struggles against imperialism is meaningless, however, if it cannot recognise the right of the anti-imperialists to defend themselves by any means, including possession of weapons equally as terrible as those of the imperialist enemy.

Once again, from the mythical Third Camp, the conflict was seen as simply between two 'imperialist superpowers'.

Vietnam Solidarity?

Cliff's International Socialists and today's SWP have an even more consistent feature than their theory of state capitalism. It is their tendency to accommodate to every prevailing wind on the British left. Just as their Korean position reflected the fierce Cold War communism of the 1950s, their pacifism on Cuba reflected the growth of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. In the late '60s, despite the State Capitalist logic of their previous positions on Vietnam, the IS adapted to the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign which supported the Vietnamese Stalinists previously execrated by IS.

To cover this manoeuvre, IS adopted a *stages theory* of revolution in the colonial world. In now supporting the Vietnamese struggle they argued: "In the same way, socialists were required in the nineteenth century to

support bourgeois liberal movements against feudal or absolutist regimes" (IS 32). Only bourgeois tasks were on the agenda of the Vietnamese revolution:

Of course, when the issue of American power is settled, we know what kind of regime and policies the NLF will choose—and be forced to choose by the logic of the situation. But that is, for the moment, another fight, the real fight for socialism. (IS 32).

The Vietnam episode brings to light another essential programmatic ingredient of state capitalist theory—a view like that of the Menshevik 'socialists' which held that every underdeveloped country first had to experience a stage of bourgeois capitalist development.

The 1950s and 1960s saw important nationalist movements against imperialism in Egypt and Algeria as well as in Indo-China. Large sections of the centrist and reformist left presumed that this signified a decisive shift in the terrain of the class struggle to a struggle between the "first" and the "third" worlds. Against this impressionistic view the IS constructed their own, no less one-sided, metropolitan-centred view of the world. The positions developed by the Cliff group in the '50s and '60s effectively deny the possibility of the struggle for socialism, for workers' revolution in the semi-colonial world.

In his initial work on Russia Cliff had declared that state capitalism in Russia was *inevitable* given the revolution's isolation and the need to industrialise in order to survive in a hostile environment. His analysis explicitly states that the only two realistic programmes open for Russia in the 1920s were private capitalism or state capitalism.

This logic explains the indifference of the IS towards the prospects of a Stalinist victory in Vietnam—after all what else could be hoped for? Certainly not a genuine workers' revolution.

The IS made this view systematic in the 1960s, and explicitly jibed Lenin's theory of imperialism and Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.

Drawing on the "experience" of the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, Cliff forthrightly states that Trotsky's perspective of permanent revolution, whereby the working class can lead the struggle of the oppressed masses both against imperialism and for socialism, is no longer tenable. Trotsky, he argues, was clearly wrong in assuming the "revolutionary character of the young working class" in these countries.

Instead, in Cliff's impressionistic world view, the intelligentsia of the underdeveloped world *inevitably* comes to lead the struggle for development by constituting itself as an embryonic new state capitalist class. This supposedly "deflects" the "permanent revolution" into a stage of totalitarian state capitalist development.

Having gutted Marx's understanding of what capitalism is, having



Vietnam: the My Lai massacre by US troops

junked Lenin's theory of imperialism and abandoned Trotsky's permanent revolution, Cliff completes the destruction of the revolutionary tradition by denying the revolutionary potential of the working class in the vast majority of the globe! There only remains for these metropolitan chauvinists the "pure" working class of the advanced industrial world.

But the special difficulties of mobilising the proletariat in the semi-colonial world, on which Cliff rests so much of his schema, are nothing new for revolutionaries. In Russia, despite being an old imperialist power before the revolution, the very backwardness of the country surrounded it with the very conditions which Cliff believes should make us write off the revolutionary potential of similar working classes today!

The ability of the Bolsheviks to lead a socialist revolution in such a "backward" country was not, as Cliff believes, because of Lenin's organisational genius. The Bolsheviks succeeded because they developed and fought for a political programme, tactics and strategy capable of bringing the working class to the lead in the bourgeois revolution and carrying it over into the destruction of bourgeois rule by drawing the poor peasantry behind them.

By rejecting Lenin's theory of imperialism and seeing only the "growing irrelevance of national struggles" (Kidron in IS 20), the SWP abandons the major weapon in the fight for socialist revolution in the semi-colonies (the majority of the world!)—it abandons the fight for working class leadership in the national struggles against imperialism.

Tropical Trotskyism

Thus in the mighty struggles against imperialism, in Algeria, in Cuba, in Vietnam and Indo-China, in Nicaragua and Central America, the SWP's programme offered no goal worth fighting for. They are left only with a chronic fatalism, with the belief that all such struggles can only end in tears, in a new exploiting, totalitarian system.

This fatalism was most clearly seen in a notorious article on Ceylon where the LSSP break-away from Trotskyism joined the government. In an article titled "Tropical Trotskyism", Michael Kidron argued that the difficulties facing Ceylon in escaping from semi-colonial servitude were insurmountable. This is all he had to offer the workers and peasants by way of perspectives:

If the transition (to a modern competitive economy) is to be made at all—and it is undeniably necessary—productivity will have to be jacked up and wages held down. There is no alternative. All the LSSP can hope for is that the

workers will make the sacrifice willingly (Socialist Worker, 3 July 1969).

It is a measure of the bankruptcy of state capitalist theory that what started life as a theorisation of moral outrage at the horrors of Stalin's Russia became a rationalisation of the inevitability of 'state capitalism' except in that portion of the globe where productive forces were ripe enough for the immediate transition to socialism.

State capitalist theory has proven itself unable to explain the dynamics of international class struggle. On each occasion the state capitalists have done little more than reflect the moods of western radicalism. It has led the Cliffites to adopt reactionary positions on major struggles in the post-war world.

What Kind of Party?

From the outset Cliff rejected Lenin's idea of the revolutionary party in favour of a model which he attributed to Rosa Luxemburg.

Twenty years later he justified his supposed conversion to a "Leninist" model as necessary for a new turn away from simple propaganda work to agitation. This was his response to the fact that mass spontaneous revolt, as in France in 1968, had proved incapable of creating a revolutionary leadership: it was therefore necessary to build a combat party. Typically, in re-editing what he had written in favour of Luxemburg's model, Cliff failed to acknowledge that he was changing his line.

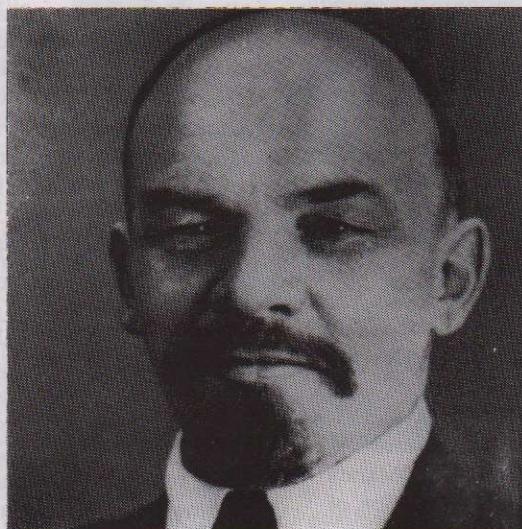
The International Socialists' understanding of the revolutionary party, continued today in the Socialist Workers Party, is repeatedly expressed in these terms: "a

revolutionary party is needed because of the uneven levels of culture and consciousness in different groups of workers. If the working class were ideologically homogeneous there would be no need for leadership" (IS 58, p.10). However, it is not simply a *homogeneous* consciousness that the working class needs but a *revolutionary* consciousness.

IS/SWP's view of the party merely as an organisation to "generalise" and "link up" the struggles of the class is at odds with Lenin's idea of a *cadre party*. Party building for the IS/SWP means opening the door to the masses on a minimal basis. Ian Birchall defended this line in his history of the SWP in the following terms:

As had always been the practice in IS, the aim was to win recruits to the organisation on the basis of a minimum agreement on activity and leave the question of education and the wider aspects of IS politics to be developed in the process of work inside the organisation.

He goes on to admit that many recruits were lost but does not explain why.



This is a recipe for deceiving potential recruits, diluting the political level of the organisation, demoralising the members and strengthening the tendency for the leadership to simply hand down the line, in contrast to democratic working out of the party's politics. IS/SWP have been responsible for destroying thousands of potential revolutionaries as a result of their short-term opportunist recruitment policies.

If the revolutionary organisation is ever to become a mass party it *must first* be a trained cadre party. Only tested and trained class fighters can lead others and build the kind of party the working class needs. Even more important, only a politically developed cadre can address the questions of theory, programme, strategy and tactics which, in a period of division and ideological crisis, are often the most urgent tasks.

What kind of programme?

Lenin's revolutionary method took shape in the crucial battle of his *Iskra* tendency against the 'economists'. These socialists, according to Lenin, refused 'to independently work out a specifically Social Democratic [Marxist] politics'. His essential definition of *economism* was not that it opposed building a party nor that it ignored political questions. Rather, as he writes in *What is to be Done?* (1902):

We see that [the economists' position] does not so much deny the political struggle as it bows to its spontaneity, to its unconsciousness.

Rejecting Lenin's idea of a party which brings its revolutionary programme into the struggles of the working class, the Cliffites seek to correct *What is to be Done?*, or even claim that Lenin changed his mind about what he had written:

If we accept Lenin's formulation that revolutionary consciousness has to be brought into the working class then precious little is left of Marx's fundamental dictum that 'the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself' (Molyneux, in Marxism and the Party, p.48).

True, Lenin wrote, after the 1905 revolution, that "the working class is instinctively, spontaneously Social Democratic", but he was not contradicting his earlier statement. For, he continues immediately:

and more than ten years of work put in by Social Democracy has done a great deal to transform this spontaneity into consciousness (Collected Works, vol. 10, p.32).

The IS/SWP's failure to understand this relationship between spontaneity and the need to fight to create *revolutionary* consciousness lies at the root of their false notion of the party and the kind of programme on which it must be built:

We must have slogans that lead us forward, light up the path before us, and raise us above the immediate tasks of the movement. To wage a consistent and sustained struggle the party of the proletariat cannot determine its tactics from occasion to occasion. (Lenin, Revolution teaches, 1905).

Instead, for Cliff and the SWP the *spontaneous* outlook of militant workers is the *touchstone* of revolutionary politics.

Lenin himself is parodied to suit the Cliff regime. The constant insistence in SWP education and literature is on Lenin as the arbiter of the political practice of the Bolsheviks, the genius at twisting and turning his organisation to the tasks of the moment. But what was really decisive about Lenin's genius, which made his *tactical* flexibility consistent, was his clarity and understanding of the programme and strategy hammered out collectively by the Bolsheviks. Lenin was one leading figure in a highly developed and trained cadre party whose whole political life was defined by the struggle to elaborate the programme and scientific perspectives of the party. Cliff's parody of the Leninist party depends on having a cartoon Lenin of his type in command. The leadership thus justifies its swings from one direction to another in reaction to events while the membership develop the passive virtue of obedience.

The Method of the Transitional Programme

All revolutionary programmes either spell out the concrete tasks which constitute the *revolutionary transition* to proletarian power, or else they are not a guide to revolutionary struggle. This was as true of the Communist Manifesto as of the April Theses of 1917 and the programme of the Fourth International. Trotsky made most explicit the understanding of the revolutionary programme as 'transitional'.

Before the Stalinist degeneration, the revolutionary Third or Communist International very deliberately developed the idea that the socialist programme had to put forward a series of tactical slogans, an action programme, addressing the major issues of the day in a way which clearly connected workers' struggles to the possibility and need for workers' political power and the destruction of capitalism. The Comintern made this explicit in direct opposition to the 'minimum-maximum' programmes of the Second International which camouflaged its political degeneration until it finally betrayed the working class into the arms of the war-mongering bourgeoisies of 1914.

What appears in the method of SWP (as in the method of Cliff's IS/SWP) is a repeated lapsing back into the minimum-maximum method. In other words, the action programme for today is limited to what militants believe is 'achievable' by the militant sections of the working class under capitalism. This 'minimum' programme is filled out with abstract propaganda for 'socialism', for a 'clear view' of the final or maximum goal, but there is no bridge between the two. In lean times when there are no political campaigns, this degenerates into combining day-to-day trade union activity with Sunday socialism.

As against the 'minimum-maximum' programme, Trotsky defined the transitional method:

It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist programme of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalter-

ably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat. (Cited by Duncan Hallas in *Trotsky's Marxism*).

Explicitly opposing this method, Duncan Hallas argues:

The problem at each stage is to find and advance those slogans which not only strike a chord in at least some sections of the class (ideally of course the whole of it) but which are also capable of leading to working class actions. Often they will not be transitional in terms of Trotsky's very restricted definition.

In other words it is enough, at least in non-revolutionary situations, to help the workers find the next step in action by offering an action programme which 'often' will not offer any perspective of a bridge to socialist or revolutionary struggle.

The SWP doctrine is that a *transitional* programme is only relevant in a revolutionary situation, in other words when key sections of the workers have already developed a 'revolutionary consciousness'. Unfortunately that would mean that they had already discovered some form of 'revolutionary' action programme (likely as not a bogus left-reformist programme in radical language) and leaders to expound it. And once more the 'real' revolutionaries would actually be tailing the existing struggles. To create a party capable of being the leading force in a revolutionary situation, with a clear action programme for power, there is no substitute for recruiting to, and, from the earliest stages, propagandising for the slogans, tactics and organisational forms that clearly spell out where the struggle must go from to-day's immediate concerns to the challenge for power.

SWP/SWM recoil from such a method. Determined to blend in with the spontaneous consciousness of militants, they egg workers on to do more of what they are already doing but will not fight to win them to the tasks that must be carried out if capitalist rule is to be centrally challenged and socialism put on the agenda. They argue that such a method would be ultra-left and would fail to relate to the actual consciousness of the workers.

The reasons the SWP give for their refusal to fight for the class to take up a system of transitional demands vary according to their own organisational needs. In the early 1970s, with the turn to a pseudo-Leninist style of organisation (which SWM began with), the rejection of a transitional action programme was because the "upturn" in the class struggle was sufficient to automatically transform workers' consciousness in a revolutionary direction. Since the late 1970s the transitional method was rejected as being too ultra-left in the "downturn" of the

struggle. The truth is that the SWP rejects the method of the transitional programme entirely. They prefer to tailor to the present period the method of the old minimum-maximum programme as practised by the Second International in its centrist period.

To put forward a transitional programme in the present period would be 'ultra-left' (in fact sectarian) only if 'transitional demands' were imposed mechanically as the exclusive slogans of all agitation around immediate struggles. On the contrary, the most sensitive possible tactics for partial and immediate struggles of the day are *always* called for. That is evident to any trade union activist or honest fighter among women, youth or anti-imperialists. What is not excusable in a *revolutionary* is to fail to spell out openly in the course of struggle what *needs* to be done if a lasting answer to the needs of the masses is to be achieved.

Furthermore, *transitional* demands are not contrived for pedagogic purposes to simply teach the workers how the revolution might begin. They are the *only adequate* response for the working class *now* to the principal attacks on them, such as inflation or mass unemployment, however difficult it may actually be to win the rank and file to take them up in the short term. To fail to raise such demands is to fail to give an adequate answer even to the present-day concrete problems most sharply felt by the masses.

For example, confronted with factory closures, the Trotskyist method calls for occupations and class-wide solidarity to force the capitalist state to "expropriate and nationalise without compensation and under workers control" the factories and industrial sector laying off workers. To be sure, the audience willing to listen to any such ideas may be very small at first, a few advanced militants who will recognise that the mass of workers may have to go through many struggles before such slogans are taken up. These are precisely the ones whom the party must win in the first instance as the leaders who will raise the struggle of the broad mass to the level of their objective needs.

Nothing is so self-deluding as hiding our revolutionary tasks in order to be 'with the masses' when there is hardly even the means at hand to reach a small audience of advanced militants. Revolutionary individuals in the Cliff tradition will find, if they look, that the tradition embodied in Trotsky's work is fundamentally different. It is a method genuinely built on the gains of Marx, Engels, Lenin, the Bolsheviks and the revolutionary Communist International of 1919-23.



CHAPTER FOUR

From Political Disorientation to Sectarianism

The overall trajectory of the Socialist Workers Movement to date has three broad phases. In the first, as we have seen, it established its basic method. Even as it did so, its politics came under severe test: the first major recession in 20 years, the upsurge of feminism, and especially the marginalising of the left by Republicanism in the anti-Unionist revolt.

The second phase saw SWM split as it expelled the internal critics of its own political method. (This happened in close parallel with a similar challenge in Cliff's British organisation.) Immediately, however, SWM found itself drawn into the turmoil of splits and new formations on the Irish left, principally the emergence of the IRSP in 1974-5 and the creation of the Socialist Labour Party (1977) from which it finally separated as a demoralised and decimated group in 1980.

In the third phase it once more followed the turn of Cliff's organisation, away from the belief that economic struggle would politicise the working class, into a form of organisational sectarianism which, if anything, saw a more pronounced political opportunism.

SWP/SWM Politics Challenged

In Cliff's *International Socialists*, two successive left groupings developed as open factions arguing for a return to the method of Trotsky. The first, around Seán Matgamna who had been a leading figure in the old Irish Workers Group, was expelled from the IS in 1972. When IS dropped their *unconditional but critical* support for the IRA after bombings in Britain, Dave Hughes and others formed the Left Faction in IS which fought Cliff's errors on the questions of Ireland, women and work in the unions. As it did so, the Left Faction came to understand the deep difference of method which separated the IS from Trotsky's tradition. The IS leadership would not put up with their criticism and the Left Faction was expelled in 1975, to eventually form the *Workers Power* organisation of today.

A supporter of the Left Faction, on returning to Ireland, joined SWM in Belfast in January 1974. Challenging the organisation to face up to the roots of its political failures, which had left it stagnant and trailing behind events in a period of heightened social, national and political upheaval, he won the support of a minority over the next 18 months. Rather than recognize the need for serious debate, however, SWM leadership acted to end it.

In June 1975 two of the leading critics were bureaucratically removed from SWM National Committee on the basis of a charge-sheet of 'Thirty Theses' hatched by the Dublin leadership (Standing Committee). This course, it was admitted, had been privately urged by the leadership of IS in Britain, without any mandate from their own members and without any accountable democratic connection with SWM. (SWM and IS/SWP did not and still

do not have any democratically structured relationship such as international democratic centralism.)

The Standing Committee condemned their critics as a 'faction', naming them the Opposition Group (OG). The Opposition Group defended its positions in a 35-page platform *'Thirty Theses and other slanders'* at the conference of 25 Oct. 1975 where one member was expelled on the resolution of Kieran Allen, the others walking out or resigning in solidarity, having been threatened:

Conference insists that any members maintaining an oppositional group on the basis of the same, or similar, political perspective and causing similar disruption make themselves liable to immediate disciplinary action.

Three of the five set about developing their document into the *'Manifesto of the Irish Workers Group'* which was published in 1976. The new Irish Workers Group then began collaboration with Workers Power in Britain, resulting ten years later in the League for a Revolutionary Communist International (LCRI), winning further co-thinkers across Europe, the Americas and New Zealand.

The political difference between SWM leadership and the 'Opposition Group' are evident throughout this analysis. Instead of promoting discussion of the differences, SWM's leaders bureaucratically repressed them:

[The national treasurer] has said that S.W.M. does not constitutionally permit factions. What is his position on democratic centralism then? Those who wrote laborious articles and criticisms on the absence of the right to form factions in the Officials as one of the bases for their organisational malaise; those who saw the refusal of the IRSP to permit such factions as something to be regretted, now use the formal omissions of the [SWM] constitution as a bureaucratic manoeuvre to expel us and our politics. (Opposition Group reply, *Thirty Theses and Other Slanders*.)

SWM were then reminded of Trotsky's defence of the *necessary evil* of factions, in *The Third International After Lenin* (1929). It cited Trotsky's attack on applying bureaucratic party discipline to embryonic movements:

A young party representing a political organism in a completely embryonic stage, without any real contact with the masses, without the experience of a revolutionary leadership, and without theoretical schooling, has already been armed from head to foot with all the attributes of a "revolutionary order", fitted with which it resembles a six-year-old-boy wearing his father's accoutrement. ... Without a real freedom of party life, freedom of discussion and freedom of establishing their course collectively, and by means of groupings, these parties will never become a decisive revolutionary force.

The Opposition Group demanded of SWM leaders:

Why were our criticisms and disagreements never answered in the Internal Bulletin, the only possible organ for full and lengthy discussion in which all members could share. Not one leading member ever attempted to reply on issues as diverse as the programme, the Northern State and strategy, Women, Inflation, Economism, the United Front, Small Farmers, Students etc. Despite the fact that the organisation has patently failed to grow, and particularly where the OG were not active, in the South, it was we who were loyal and responsible, we who brought the issues to the members, we raised the demand for open and frank re-evaluation, sparing no personality. It was [SWM] leading members who opposed discussion—their loyalty wasn't to Marxism and the spirit of collective polemical debate—the very essence of democratic centralism—but loyalty to personality and crony.

The involvement of the International Socialists in this suppression of debate within SWM was but one detail in a history of international relations which, as the Opposition Group argued, had nothing in common with internationalism as understood in the tradition of Lenin and Trotsky. Cliff's organisation, as a matter of doctrine, repudiated the fight to build an international leadership democratically accountable to the membership of his own and overseas fraternal organisations. That was something for the far future—still not attempted after 40 years of his tendency! International democratic centralism, of course, can only be achieved through years of painstaking collaboration. Every year that it is delayed makes it more difficult to create because distinct national organisations are relentlessly driven to adapt their method to national pressures.

Even the first stage along such a road—the establishing of fraternal relations between national groups—must be conducted through formal, open and accountable structures of international meetings of delegates. Instead, Cliff's IS conducted international relations clique-to-clique. SWM followed the positions adopted by IS, without having any voting delegates at the meetings where these issues were decided. And IS had no difficulty in 'advising' its dependents in Dublin how to deal with internal criticism of IS methods.

Cliff's organisation, for example, responded to the 1974 revolution in Portugal by declaring 'fraternal relations' with the PRP/BR (*Proletarian Revolutionary Party/ Revolutionary Brigades*.) SWM followed suit without any discussion or evaluation of whether there was any real basis for political solidarity with the Portuguese group. The Opposition Group challenged this failure:

What is our fraternal relation with the PRP? ... What is their strategy for the Portuguese revolution? Where do they stand vis à vis the Communist Party and the Armed Forces Movement Lefts? Already the PRP has given implicit support to a pro-capitalist government. ... We must internally encourage debate in terms of tactics and strategy and the lessons to be learnt. We must avoid at all costs simply reducing Portugal to lessons that "workers can do it". (ibid p.19)

The defeat in Portugal was a major blow to socialist hopes across the world. The PRP/BR degenerated into guerrillaism. No accounting for the previous 'fraternal relations', or for their own patently misconceived 'internationalism', was ever published by IS or SWM.

Regroupment on the Left: the IRSP

When the Officials juked the remnants of their republican nationalism and set out to become the Workers Party, the Costello wing split and formed the 'Irish Republican Socialist Party' (IRSP) in 1974. Although the split was soon followed by assassinations, the new political formation was not yet subordinated to a military clique as in the Provisionals and Officials. It drew many left republicans and socialists keen to fuse the anti-imperialist and socialist struggles, some of them eager for our guidance on questions of programme and keen to discuss with us the revolutionary communist tradition.

For less than a year it was possible for a tendency such as SWM to relate directly to some sections of the new party. Both the leadership and the 'Opposition' members favoured a bold *entry* into the IRSP in order to enter its debates and campaigns and win it to revolutionary communism in the imminent working out of its programme. The Opposition Group members argued that this should be done as an openly declared tendency, believing that SWM was not sufficiently cadreised and politically trained to succeed as mere individuals in the IRSP.

The leadership argued that it was unrealistic to seek open tendency rights and proposed that SWM dissolve into the IRSP. Rejecting the Opposition Group line, the leadership found that they could not carry their own line either. At last, in the face of a major opportunity for the group in relation to the anti-imperialist struggle, their motion was blocked by the economicist and workerist outlook of the members.

SWM delegates were reduced to observers at the IRSP conference. A resolution sponsored by the left, including Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey, argued for a form of tendency rights. It was defeated by a margin of about 2%! It might well have been won had SWM been able to openly struggle for it.

'Revolutionary Regroupment'

In the months after the split between the Opposition Group and SWM Costello's military wing, the 'TNLA' established its total dominance in the IRSP. The left around McAliskey abandoned it to set up an *Irish Committee for a Socialist Programme*. This body resisted discussion and debate with other tendencies and produced nothing. Out of it McAliskey and others created the *Independent Socialist Party* (ISP) which produced a workerist propaganda bulletin *The Five Eighth* and a single issue of their paper *Independent Socialist* for May-day 1978.

Eamonn McCann, a leading figure in the 'revolutionary' left in the key



CHAPTER FOUR

period from 1967 to 1970, and now SWM's major public figure, actually joined no organisation after 1970 except the short-lived Independent Socialist Party, until the early 1980s. In 1975 he had briefly become a candidate member of SWM. At SWM's national meeting (16 March 1975) which debated tactics towards the IRSP he co-sponsored the resolution from the Opposition Group for open entry into the IRSP. In order to deprive this resolution of his vote, however, the leadership refused to confirm him as a full member when requested at that meeting.

After the expulsion of the Opposition Group, SWM issued a 'limited circulation' document attacking those who had split, in an attempt to win back McCann, and to appeal to others who had left the IRSP. He declined to re-join until after the H Block struggle of 1981.

Because it had the support of Bernadette McAliskey and Eamonn McCann the Independent Socialist Party was able to interest the left groups in a developing discussions on left unity. It published a document, borrowing the slogan of IWG, *For Revolutionary Regroupment*, and many of our characterisations of the left fragments. It recognised that IWG made a 'valid critique of other groups' but dismissed IWG as 'sectarian'.

This charge rebounded when McCann's own Independent Socialist Party (ISP) cobbled together a public meeting of 200 for 'Socialist Unity' to which it invited speakers only from Peoples Democracy, SWM and the Irish section of the USFI. Nothing at all resulted from the ISP's method of 'regroupment' and this organisation disappeared without trace.

(The term 'Irish section of USFI' will be used for further references to the group known today as Peoples Democracy. The United Secretariat of the Fourth International, the USFI, led by Ernest Mandel, admitted its Irish section, the RMG or Revolutionary Marxist Group in 1972. It became the MSR or Movement for a Socialist Republic in 1975. Subsequently it was to form the RST or Republican Socialist Tendency in the Socialist Labour Party, and from 1980 it took over the name of Peoples Democracy.)

Socialist Labour Party

In the general election of 1977, Matt Merrigan and Noel Browne stood as 'Independent Labour' candidates, having been bureaucratically de-selected by the pro-coalition leadership. Browne was elected TD for Artane in Dublin. They and their *Liaison of the Labour Left* grouping abandoned Labour and called for the building of a new party. SWM, the USFI section and the IWG all joined in the debates and polemics at the end of 1977 to define what kind of party this should be.

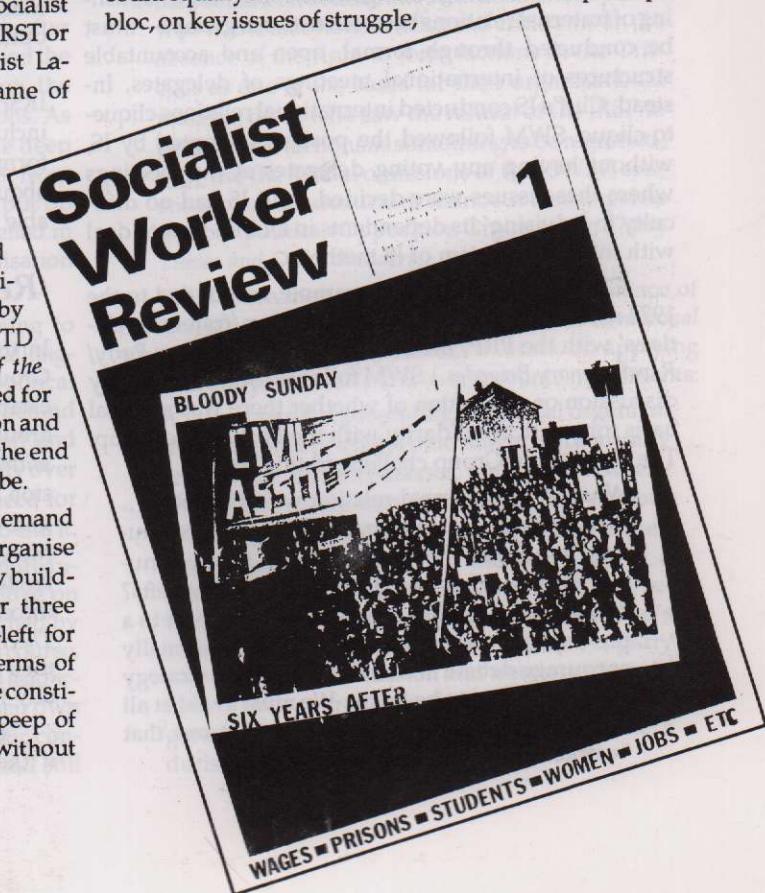
Once more, only the IWG openly raised the demand for the explicit right of all political tendencies to organise and publish under their own names while loyally building the new Socialist Labour Party. The other three 'Trotskyist' groups attacked the IWG as ultra-left for raising this demand, as they thought only in terms of discreetly organising within the new party. At the constitutional conference, however, there was not a peep of opposition to the IWG motion which was passed without a division.



Matt Merrigan and Noel Browne split from Labour in the General Election 1977

Under these conditions, and with about 300 activists joining the party, there was an unprecedented opportunity to combine frank programmatic debate with real unity in action of the different tendencies by turning the party outwards in struggle. Towards this end, even from the start, IWG resolutions equipped the party with elements of a revolutionary programme, such as fighting for expropriation under workers control of factories threatening closure.

The rump League for a Workers Republic soon left the Socialist Labour Party, believing that socialists should stay in the Labour Party. The USFI group joined but did not openly declare their tendency until the second year of the SLP. A *Socialist Workers Tendency* was declared by the SWM, supposedly open to all on a 'broad' three-point platform. Although the IWG and the USFI group could equally have collaborated in this as a principled bloc, on key issues of struggle,



struggle, against the ex-Labour reformists, this was rejected by SWM. They wanted to constitute a larger SWM without making this obvious to possible sympathizers. They ejected the IWG from their 'open' meeting which launched the tendency. In response to their duplicity the IWG called for a broad action-alliance to create an alternative to the left-reformist leadership. This resulted in the *Workers Alliance for Action* involving 30 SLP members on a platform of turning the party out to struggle, publishing its own bulletin, *Spark*.

The IWG continued to operate as a distinct revolutionary communist tendency publishing *Class Struggle* journal.

Abortion was raised by the IWG as a right which had to be clearly and openly asserted in the SLP programme while recognising that it was not an immediate *agitational* issue in the way that contraception then was. To the surprise of the centrists who accused the IWG of being ultra-left for raising the issue, the SLP conference in May 1978 voted by a two-thirds majority to defend women who had abortions against criminalization, and by a smaller majority to call for a woman's right to choose abortion.

The most substantial difference between the (ex-Labour) leaders and the left tendencies was on the national struggle. SLP president David Neligan declared he 'wouldn't be seen dead' on a march in support of the H Block hunger strikers. Merrigan was the only one of them to argue in favour of the clear majority anti-imperialist position adopted at the January 1979 conference.

Despite the political gains of the conference, ultimate control of the party remained with the ex-Labour left-reformists. The 'revolutionaries' of SWM and the USFI group ignored the IWG's proposal to form a bloc in the Party elections to oust the left-reformists who were increasingly holding back the development of the SLP as a party of struggle. Even when Noel Browne openly refused to defend in the Dáil the SLP's solidarity with the anti-imperialist struggle, the centrist lefts could not bring themselves to demand that he follow the party line. Unable to win over the left-reformists and parliamentary socialists neither would they risk losing them by defending the SLP programme, not to mention arguing for their own programmes.

The new national executive which met in February 1979 included 5 SWM, 1 USFI and 3 IWG members but was dominated by the ex-Labour grouping. The right-wing around Browne in Artane threatened to disaffiliate unless the party started fighting around positions which would win seats in the local elections. They were opposed to campaigning for political status for H Block prisoners, and against the Party's emphasis on the struggle for women's emancipation, especially any mention of abortion.

What followed is fully recorded in *Class Struggle* (IWG journal no. 5, Summer '79). The National Executive Committee (NEC) placated Artane by refusing to implement the Conference decisions. The IWG moved to defend the conference decisions:

In view of the clear Conference majority for intervention on the National Question and on women's issues, based on the programme of the Party, NEC rejects the restriction of the Party's activity

to 'health, education, housing and the economy', and resolves, as well, to mobilise all the organs of the Party to implement fully our policy on the National Question and women".

Voting *for* were three IWG and one Belfast member of SWM. Kieran Allen of SWM abstained, and three SWM leading members voted against.

The ex-Labourites then resolved that the party's priorities, in order, were jobs and wages; contraception; housing, health and local elections; and nuclear power. (One member of SWM voted for this, one abstained and the others voted against.) Finally, IWG members on the Executive proposed the following motion in the light of Dr. Browne's public statement dissociating himself from the Party's discipline in Dáil Eireann because of its position on Republicanism:

NEC resolves that Noel Browne, as a TD, cannot remain as a member of the SLP while refusing to act in the Dáil as an SLP spokesperson.

Only the 3 IWG members voted for it.

Within days Party president Neligan divulged to the *Irish Times* how the 'left' had been defeated in the NEC. In conditions of a national postal strike, the IWG informed the membership and defended the Conference positions with a reply in the *Irish Times*. The next NEC suspended IWG members and proscribed the IWG as a tendency. They also suppressed all rights of publication by tendencies—with the support of SWM! It was a small price for SWM to pay for an alliance with the left reformists in a 'united party' which would get rid of the IWG and clear the field for their own recruitment project. SWM dropped their own tendency publication in compliance with Neligan. They informed the IWG that they *would not defend us unless we undertook to make no public statements on the issue!*

A petition in defence of the IWG, with enough signatures to recall the party conference, was tabled for the March National Executive meeting. It was denied a hearing when SWM voted with the reformists to allow them table an un-notified pre-emptive motion. This, by a majority of one vote, immediately proscribed the IWG and suspended all members of it from the SLP.

In spite of SWM's claims that they would defend the IWG as part of the fight to restore party democracy, it was their members throughout the party who implemented the suspensions when the victims resisted by turning up at branch and other party meetings. (*Class Struggle* journal no. 5, pp 30-31.)



The SLP at the Dublin May Day rally 1978

Nothing can dissolve away the compelling evidence of SWM's opportunism in the SLP. Indeed, SWM's national treasurer abandoned his own organisation to give total allegiance to the SLP leadership, believing that building the SLP would do more for socialism in Ireland than building SWM!

SWM hung on, desperately hoping to reconstitute the remnants of the SLP around its own politics until its own membership had bled away. It emerged from the SLP in spring of 1980, decimated. It could hardly count 20 active members nationally.

In April 1980 *The Worker* re-appeared, presented as the first issue of a new paper! The editorial "Why the Socialist Workers Movement" told us:

SWM does not arrive on the scene with a new formula for winning a new socialist Ireland. The members of the new organisation are already involved in the activities for which we are seeking wider support and new members. Some of us have come out of the SLP because that organisation—as a Party—would not adopt the priorities and methods which—we are convinced—are essential for the building of mass support for socialism within the working class. We are launching a new independent group—and in a sense returning to an earlier independence—to bridge the gap between the ultimate aim of socialism and the consciousness of the mass of our fellow workers and oppressed.

What mealy-mouthed hypocrisy and deceit! Never a word of self-criticism—nothing learned and nothing gained!

The 'new' organisation continued to build Cliff's tendency in Ireland, but not without a new infusion from his renamed *Socialist Workers Party*. The SWP's help became crucial to survival when the organisation was abandoned by its most experienced leadership. They confirmed their appetite for wider respectability in the short-

lived *Gralton* magazine created by the ex-SWM leadership as a platform for feminists, reformists, Stalinists etc.

Building a Sect in the 'Downturn'

SWM signalled a new turn at the end of 1983, reflected in renaming the paper *Socialist Worker* (No. 1, Feb-March 1984). This was explained:

The main reason for the change was to reflect the whole range of our politics and the fact that we believe the struggle for socialism to be both a political and an economic battle.

What lies behind this solemn statement of the trivially obvious? In reality SWM was implementing the earlier turn of the SWP in Britain which its own involvement in the Socialist Labour Party and the H Block campaigns had made it impossible to carry out earlier in Ireland.

Cliff had turned his organisation at the end of the 1960s to more active intervention, believing that economic struggle would bring the working class increasingly towards them as the 'revolutionary' combat party. By the late '70s, however, disoriented by their dismal political failure to make any such gains, Cliff responded to the crisis of his politics with an organisational perspective. He wrote off the possibilities of the class struggle for the time being and declaring instead the need to 'build the party', the 'Socialist Workers Party, so as to 'be ready the next time'!

The politics were unchanged, but SWM now systematically refused to take campaign initiatives except where they could dominate them organisationally for their own recruitment purposes. That also meant sup-

SWM-led Reagan Reception Campaign demonstrates outside the Dáil as Reagan speaks, 4 June 1984.



porting pacifist or reformist campaigns in order to make more contacts on a politically opportunist basis.

Consciously Sectarian Method

Recruiting predominantly among youth and students, SWM withdrew from engagement in campaigns that would draw them into any form of debate on strategy and tactics. This meant turning up to the actions to recruit individuals, but not raising their own programme in the political debates on strategy and tactics at open conferences and frequently refusing any responsibility for political leadership in struggle.

Where they could dominate a spontaneous movement of protest they did so, and tailored it strictly to their own recruitment ends. Where they could not, they not only maintained a mere token presence but adopted an openly cynical attitude to any concern with the tactical and strategic questions involved.

Examples include the Reagan Reception Campaign in April-May 1984. Its highest achievement was a demo of 5,000 outside the Dáil addressed by Kieran Allen and Eamonn McCann who both assured the crowd that 'this is only the beginning' of the opposition to Reagan. Yet not a single further meeting was convened. And for the rest of the decade the burning international questions of US aggression against the masses of Nicaragua and Salvador were left as propaganda issues to the church-related and Stalinist groups.

And when Thatcher came to Dublin Castle (3 Dec. 1984) and was met by a demonstration of 2,000, once more the crowd was assured by McCann and Allen that this was the start of a fight that would mobilise thousands to stop extradition of Republicans. No meeting or campaign was convened in the wake of this demagogic and the Extradition campaign of a year later was left to Republicans who set their face firmly towards Fianna Fáil and against orienting to the working class as argued by the IWG at all stages.

Campaign against War in the Gulf

The SWM-dominated Campaign against War in the Gulf (analysed in *Class Struggle* papers 19 and 20) was special in many respects. Other political tendencies such as the IWG were smeared as 'representing nothing' though the IWG organised the only large college teach-ins, one of them a meeting of 500 students in Galway Regional College accompanied by a general lecture boycott. We were accused of trying to turn the campaign into a 'united front of political organisations' which they insisted it was not. Ironically, in order to prove that SWM did not 'dominate' the campaign, they defended the authority of the self-appointed national committee precisely by claiming that it comprised representatives of political

organisations—the Communist Party, Peoples Democracy and Green Party as well as SWM!

While insisting that the campaign was under the control of ordinary activists and not of political groups, SWM entirely controlled it. In the biggest action group in the campaign they ensured that all eight delegates to the campaign conference were SWM nominees, while insisting that there was no question of SWM domination. The campaign should have been launched with an open democratic conference in autumn of 1990 but the war was over by the time SWM eventually convened it and reduced it to a farce.

Much more significant about this campaign, however, was the political opportunism of the SWP and SWM. In Britain they openly dropped their opposition to the *imperialist* character of the war by fully supporting and merging into the pacifist campaign to 'Stop the War'. This meant, according to most of the organisations involved, calling on Iraq to toe the United Nations line and withdraw from Kuwait. SWM tried to achieve the same outcome in Ireland by affiliating their campaign, over the heads of the action groups, to a pacifist alliance of church, Stalinist and reformist organisations, the *Gulf Peace Campaign*.

This alliance, however, refused to have admit an action campaign whose members insisted on calling on the US to get out of the Gulf! What made all the more ridiculous SWM's belief that membership of the Gulf Peace Campaign would make for a 'broader' movement was the turnout on demonstrations where the latter consistently turned out far fewer supporters!

War is an acid test for centrists because it exerts the greatest pressure towards opportunism. Despite their best efforts, SWM could not gain admission to the Gulf Peace Campaign which openly took a pacifist pro-United Nations position. Indeed, from the start, SWM refused to include in its own 'anti-imperialist' campaign any open opposition to UN sanctions against Iraq, sanctions which prepared the war and continued to starve the Iraqi poor long after the war.



CHAPTER FIVE

SWM and the National Question

SWM adopted not only the theory and programme of the IS/SWP but its tactical orientation which had been formed in relation to militant trade unionism in metropolitan capitalist Britain.

It tried to apply this outlook in a chronically dependent, uneven, semi-colonial Ireland in which the working class was deeply divided in two reactionary clerical states and where the class struggle was often 'covered over' by radical nationalism. Clearly such an approach had to face real problems in making any of the organisational gains of the IS/SWP group, let alone become a focus of leadership for the mass ranks of the Irish working class.

The most vivid example of this is seen in the very first editions of *The Worker* published in Jan 1972. At that time the struggle against the Northern State had reached *mass proportions* in an armed conflict of the forces of British Imperialism and the Northern State against the Provisional and Official Republican movements. Here was a concrete test of the revolutionary socialist politics of SWM. Could it provide a concrete class lead for militants among the anti-unionist masses, the southern working class, and ultimately the protestant working class?

The only reference to the actual struggle in the North in SWM's 'What We Stand For' was a list of demands without the slightest suggestion of *how* they were to be fought for. Their 'programme', put sharply to the test, failed to recognize the need to mobilize and unite the aroused anti-unionist masses around the burning issues of the day—internment and army and police repression and brutality; repressive legislation etc.—and working-class-led self-defence against the forces of British imperialism.

Central had to be the concrete slogan for *anti-imperialist united fronts of workers socialists and republicans* around the key immediate issues of the moment. The fight to build local committees across the North and South for action and solidarity on these issues could have challenged *concretely* both the false solutions of NICRA and the petit bourgeois led Civil Resistance campaign. Instead, SWM offered abstract lessons in 'Marxist theory' about the superiority of *class to nation*.

By the second edition of *The Worker* in February, events in the North underlined its complete irrelevance to the Irish masses. The murder of 14 civilians by the Paras had brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets across the country in strikes and marches. The British embassy was burnt down. Thousands more working class youth joined the Republican movements. In its front page *The Worker* headlined: "Only Workers Action Can Free Ireland", and went on—

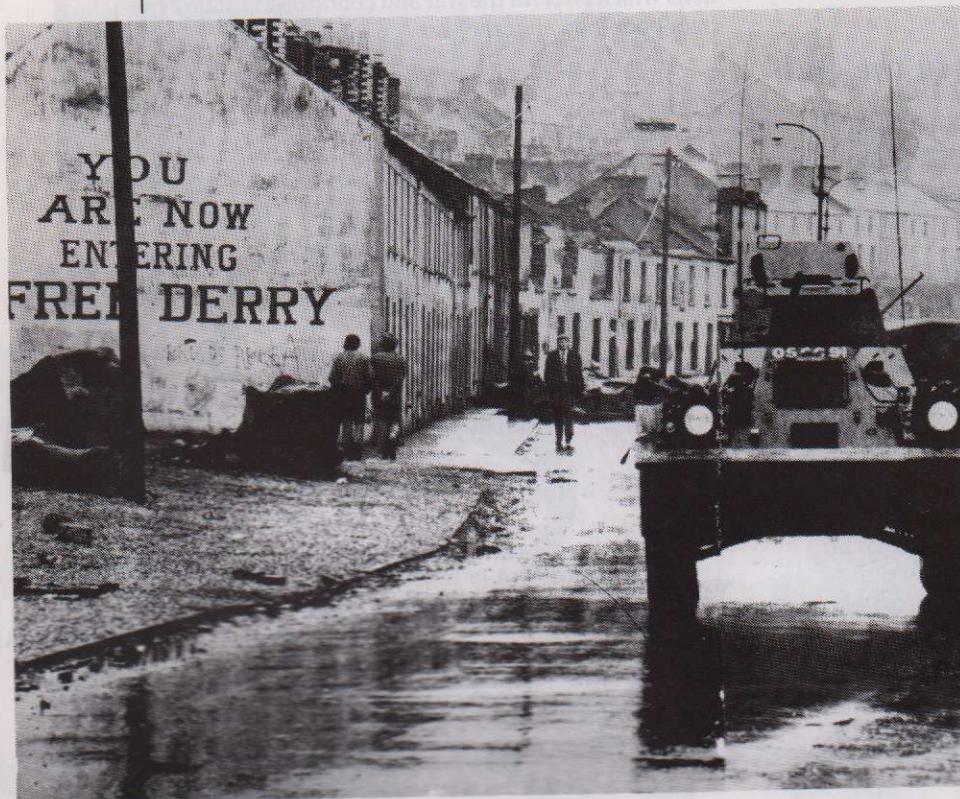
The Derry massacre must also mark a new phase in the resistance. It must, above all, bring the extension of the struggle against British imperialism in the 26 counties. The burning of the British Embassy, the mass demonstrations in towns which have not seen a political demonstration for many years, the largely spontaneous industrial action taken by tens of thousands of workers, all of these point to the potential which does exist. (Feb '72)

And how does SWM address this potential from these enormous events? Warning, correctly, against illusions that spontaneous actions of the masses alone can defeat British imperialism, it suggests—

What we must do is build a mass movement of workers which strikes directly at British economic and political interests in the 26 Counties. That is the most effective support we can give... only if we are successful in this is there any chance of a victory for the Irish people over British imperialism. Even the most sophisticated armed struggles of oppressed peoples play a subordinate role in comparison to that of the political movement of the working class.

This school-masterly article continues by admonishing the republicans for ignoring the importance of 'class' and, laughably, warning the Southern workers of the dangers of "becoming infatuated with terror". It quotes Marx's battle-cry for the German revolution in 1850—'Make the Revolution Permanent', and after this fine lesson on the abstract do's and don'ts of revolutionary struggle, SWM offers a list of demands—for workers "to press for".

Operation Motorman: the British Army remove last barricades in 1972



In the very heart of *pre-revolutionary* events, hundreds of thousands mobilized North and South, armed conflict against the northern state with mass support, SWM's only 'socialist' solution is for the building "of a mass workers' movement which strikes directly at British economic and political interests in the 26 counties" with the magnificent aim... to "expose the hypocrisy of [Taoiseach] Lynch's position".

SWM could not connect the idea of a working class led challenge to capitalism with the events in the North and the mass response across the island. Occupation and seizure of British factories and banks, *fighting to expropriate them under workers' control*, was a vital action-goal in mobilizing against British imperialism—but even that elementary requirement of any communist action programme was too much for the 'Trotskyists' of SWM. Such action should have aimed to bring the anti-unionist and Southern working class to the head of the struggle against the Northern state. The perspective fought for should have included the fight for an all-out indefinite general strike; for the building of worker-led *united fronts* of struggle to organize material aid for the anti-unionist masses in the North, as well as to end all repressive legislation and measures of collaboration by the southern bourgeois state.

Central to these tasks would have been to prevent the Southern bourgeoisie employing its anti-partition rhetoric to deflect the masses while cynically preparing to move the army to seal the border and stop solidarity action from the South. It was the task of revolutionaries to focus the widespread unrest among the rank and file soldiers by calling for the building of *soldiers' committees* around the demand on them to refuse to seal the border. There was a concrete need to fight for opening of the arsenals for "arms to the north" and the need, therefore, for defence detachments of a united front, led by the working class, to be built to aid the anti-unionist masses.

Alas, no fight took place for such class-based politics and programme in the struggles of the hour. If even a small nucleus of an organization (such as SWM in 1972) had *begun* to openly address the all-Ireland working class along the lines of such a programme it would have become a real focus for the best militants and fighters of the day. It would have established its credentials as a *revolutionary socialist organization*, putting forward *practical* and *concrete class-based* methods and goals for widening and deepening the struggle and building an alternative to the physical force nationalists.

SWM in the H Block Campaign: Tailing Sinn Féin

The 1972 period showed SWM standing aside from the national struggle because they didn't understand how to, or with what concrete proposals, to contest Republican hegemony of the struggle. Almost 10 years later the H Block Campaign made it impossible for SWM to remain aloof, but they proved no better able to cope with the same challenge.

When Labour's Northern Ireland Secretary Merlyn Rees decided to phase out political status for Republican prisoners from 1976, what he set in train was to end in 1981 in the largest mass mobilization and action seen in Ireland since Bloody Sunday. As the number of prisoners refused political status began to grow, they refused uniforms and wore only blankets, soon turning to the 'dirty protest'. Attempts to launch a campaign on their behalf first came from the relatives of the prisoners, and from these initiatives was launched the Relatives' Action Committees (RAC) in 1977.

The Relatives Action Committees existed for almost three years, mobilising thousands on marches and rallies. It was obvious that such a perspective alone, broadly in tune with the Sinn Féin's, had little hope of forcing the hand of the British. The task for revolutionary socialists lay in arguing for the fight to build a democratic campaign open to all the forces of the anti-unionist and Southern masses but with the *key* focus of mobilizing the *working class* and labour movement for action—the only action that could hit directly at the vital *material* interests of capitalist imperialism.

Linked to this was the need to build genuine democratic action committees to unite workplaces, communis-

ties and the relatives in a 'fist of action'. The crucial tactic was the *anti-imperialist united front* of workers, socialists and Republicans. At conference after conference from the beginning in 1977 the IWG openly spelled out this perspective. When the IWG became a tendency in the Socialist Labour Party we fought to commit the SLP to adopt this as its action programme on the national question.

The record of SWM was very different. At no time did SWM (or their Tendency in the SLP) ever fight to commit the Relatives Action Committee movement to the goal of strike action by workers, even when activists generally were despairing of the policy of endless marches and rallies. At the largest conference (500 attended) organized by the RAC together with independent socialists and Republicans in Coalisland (22 Jan '78), SWM at last put forward a resolution calling "for a turn to activity in the working class". It was mere demagogic, for they opposed as 'premature' the IWG motion, to fight for industrial action as the *focus* of such a turn. They and the Republicans repeatedly made this argument right up until the Hunger Strike when the Republicans turned it around and insisted it was 'too late' to fight for workers' strike action!

Similarly SWM opposed any attempt to build genuine open democratic action committees, centred on the fight for workers' action, involving all the social and political forces of the nationalist community in the North. The IWG had argued that the existing *Trade Union Campaign Against Repression* (initiated by SWM itself in 1976) should become the starting point to fight for Action

committees linking delegates from workplaces, unions, community groups and political organizations. SWM had no such conception of the need for action committees which alone could *weld together* the anti-unionist masses behind working class action.

Instead, SWM *uncritically tailied the RAC* and its essentially humanitarian programme and perspective of 'protest' while rejecting the call for a campaign with a democratically elected, accountable and recallable leadership for a united struggle of workplaces and communities. As SWM argued:

When marches and meetings are planned the factories and building sites are now included as targets of support ... we in TUCAR have a good working relationship with the RAC. They do the communities, we in TUCAR do the factories and building sites for marches and meetings. (SW Review, conference issue 1978, p.24)

But while it is undoubtedly true that the RAC did heroic work in publicizing the issue of the H Blocks, it is also equally true that its campaign brought victory for the prisoners not one step nearer. This was not because of lack of determination or courage. It lacked a *strategy*. The decision by the prisoners to 'up' their protest to 'no wash' indicated the failure of the RAC campaign. The launch of a new campaign by the Republican Movement in 1979, with a much more deliberate humanitarian appeal to the Irish middle classes, to the SDLP and the church, was a direct result of the failure to develop an alternative strategy.

Founding of the National H Block Campaign

At the 'Green Briar' conference in Nov. 1979 a decision was taken to establish a new campaign on an explicitly *humanitarian* basis. It ruled out any call for *political status* and substituted five specific demands of prison reform which, the IWG argued, threatened to obscure completely the political essence of the prisoners' struggle as prisoners of war. The perspective of the campaign, in spite of the clear failure of the RAC campaigns—was for the building of a pressure-group protest movement.

Again, the IWG *openly argued*, drawing on the lessons of the past, for the *centrality* of a working-class-based United Front with *strikes* as its key method of action. Again *all* opposed this, *including* SWM. They, while arguing "for an orientation to the working class movement" agreed with Gerry Adams, the proposer of the motion for "a broad based movement" that it was too *early* to make the call for strike action a focus of the campaign. Only when the campaign's Trade Union Committee had made the contacts in the workplaces and unions would the campaign be in a position to consider arguing for industrial action, according to Adams. Meanwhile he would get on with the *realpolitik* of courting the humanitarian sympathy of the Catholic hierarchy and the bourgeois nationalists.

Adams had deliberately caricatured the IWG position as one of believing it was merely a simple matter of calling for strikes and workers would down tools. What the IWG did argue was that without a *perspective* and

goals for workers to take action then there was no focus which to rally trade unionists, other than as Saturday marchers behind humanitarian banners. Only the clear signal that the campaign wanted and would fight for *strike action* through building contacts in the workplaces, union branches, through trade union resolutions at conferences etc., could workers be expected to *organize* for action, but also, crucially, to become centrally involved in the campaign.

It was obvious at this conference—and the others later—that the Provisionals had not the slightest intention of organizing workers. The broad based campaign was obviously directed, by its humanitarian and moral arguments about 'peace and justice', towards Fianna Fáil, the SDLP and the Catholic Church. The presence of Father Piaras O'Dúill on the national Committee was a direct link through Fathers Murray and Faul to Bishop Daly and Cardinal O'Fiaich, who in effect became the Campaign's secret negotiators-cum-diplomats dealing with John Hume and Charles Haughey.

June 1980: Strike action still 'premature'

Between the foundation of the National H Block Campaign in Nov. 1979 and the next conference in June 1980, SWM reported avidly on the growth of trade union involvement in the H Block—resolutions of support of 'the five demands' were being passed in branches, Trades Councils and union conferences, prisoners adopted by TU branches etc. Criticizing the liberal, humanitarian basis of the campaign as compromising the fight for *political status* to allow Haughey and Thatcher off the hook, SWM wrote—

The active support of the labour movement cannot be won by appeals to humanitarianism ... all in all there is a need for a major re-orientation of the present H Block campaign (The Worker [Mark II] No. 1, April 1980, p.4)

The fight for political status needs, therefore, to start in the working class movement. And it can only be won on the basis of arguing for the political rights of prisoners to oppose the Northern state. (The Worker, No. 2, June 1980, p.8)

Yet *The Worker* never explained why a leading member of SWM—Kieran Allen—accepted *membership* of the Southern Executive of the National H Block Campaign—a popular front of pan-Catholic nationalists founded on a humanitarian platform.

Hunger Strike: Nov. 1980 Still Too Early

It was hardly surprising when the prisoners after nearly five years in the Blocks, on the blanket and the dirty protests, lost patience with the H Block Campaign. Their decision to go on hunger strike underlined the total bankruptcy of the strategy of both the RAC and National H Block Campaign. This dramatically raised the stakes in the whole issue, for the prisoners could not be expected to live for more than eight or nine weeks.



Tens of thousands march on British Embassy, 18 July 1981.

The IWG at this point in the campaign first argued that the call for industrial action must now go out with an explicit perspective of mobilizing an *indefinite general strike* as the only way to break Thatcher and save the prisoners. Only that call, the IWG argued, could give a clear focus to workers and militants to *broaden* any action and to counter any illusions that token days of strike action and more marches were enough. Crucially, only such an action goal could *centralize* and unify the *workplaces* and communities—youth, women, tenants associations, cultural groups etc.—behind the growing power of the strike weapon.

Already on 4 Nov. a mass half-day strike had taken place in Derry and spontaneous walk outs were still occurring elsewhere. The potential existed for developing, at least in the North, a series of rolling strikes if the decisive call went out. But, again, the chicken-hearted National H Block Committee refused. Worse, the national trade union sub committee in Dublin on 16 Nov., in which SWM participated, opposed the IWG demand that it issue a call for industrial action—it was still 'too early'! And this several weeks into the hunger strike! As the IWG put it in *Class Struggle* at the time:

The IWG asked, and continues to ask, what about all the "preparation" of the past years; the resolution-passing and bureaucratic courting of trade union officials—were these gentlemen now 'prepared' enough to act instead of mouthing a few platitudes? What was the value of the 'softly, softly' approach when the chips were down? ...

The plain truth of the matter is that the 'socialists' (of SWM, PD, LWR etc.) were frightened any calls now made for industrial action would be met with silence from the rank and file and they were entirely justified in these fears, for it was they who, for four years, had argued that it was too **early** to go to the rank and file and fight for action. No wonder they now feared that the rank and file would not listen, no wonder they now pleaded, as the hunger strike crisis mounted daily that it was still too **early**, knowing that what they really meant was they feared it was now too **late** to call upon the anti-unionist workers and expect anything but contempt. (*Class Struggle* journal, No. 8, July 1981 p.12) [The name of PD had now been taken over by the USFI group in Ireland.]

At the national conference of the trade union 'sub-committee', the call to make the fight for an indefinite general strike the key focus of the H Block campaign was *carried*—it was opposed by SWM.

SWM's line was forced to undergo a sea-change between 16 Nov. and 10 Dec. in order not to be *seen tailing* the much more advanced resolution of the national trade union conference of the campaign. Having till then opposed the call for a general strike an SWM bulletin produced after the conference of 16 Nov. appealed to all, on its front page, to "Prepare for General Strike", and carried an article "Building the Campaign to a General Strike" which began:

Industrial action is what's needed to win political status. There is no other way.

Correct! but wasn't that the case all through the RAC and H Block campaigns! When SWM opposed any attempt to make it a reality? Now that workers *had* taken action, much of it spontaneously, the opportunism of SWM was clearly exposed. They tailed behind the workers rather than fight for a clear line of march at their head.

But the decision of the trade union conference was summarily overturned through the connivance of Sinn Féin and Peoples Democracy (the USFI group). Instead, they scrapped posters calling for the fight for general strike action and substituted the goal of a national day of action for 10 Dec. Allen, for the SWM, revealed the seriousness of his own organisation's call for the general strike by *opposing* the inclusion of the slogan on campaign posters prior to the day of action!

Inevitably the campaign failed and the prisoners called off their hunger strike.

January 1981: the Second Hunger Strike

At the recalled H Block Conference in January 1981 the announcement was made of another hunger strike led by Bobby Sands. It was to be a chain of hunger strikes which would continue throughout the year. At the conference only the IWG argued, from the lessons of the first, for the absolute priority for rebuilding a united front campaign around the fight for industrial action with the goal of an indefinite general strike.

SWM, the other centrists and the republicans opposed this. Once more the perspective of the H Block campaign was reaffirmed with the proviso that the trade union sub-committee would be holding a conference in February 'to lay the basis for industrial action'. Reporting after that trade union conference in Derry, SWM had this to say:

Although the forces represented at the conference were small, ... nevertheless a serious, realistic, but militant strategy of building support for industrial action was adopted—the centrepiece of which is a National day of Industrial action on April 15th—the 45th day of Sands' Hunger Strike. (The Worker, April 1981, p.8, our emphasis)

The "serious strategy" of the Derry Conference was a *refusal* to make any calls for action until seven and a half weeks of Bobby Sands' life had ebbed away. The IWG argued at the conference that it was a recipe for *passivity* whose result could only be disastrous. In an interview with two of the Republican trade unionists in the Derry H Block trade union committee, the decision was defended:

I can only speak for Derry but we think that we can get action again and sustain it better this time. Last time we probably peaked too soon and lost the initiative. This time we're working towards action on Day 45 and then planning to keep it going by selective occupations and other tactics ... the spoof from some people in the conference today about General Strike and all that is just garbage; they don't know what they're talking about. (Same issue of The Worker)

The complacency of these sentiments, applauded by SWM, could hardly be equalled in a situation where the prisoners' lives were at stake. This meant that, as there was no call for workers to do anything for *seven weeks* or more, there would not be any fight by militants and activists to get action up until the 45th day. It induced only passivity and frustration. The initiative had been handed back to the H Block campaign leaders for seven-and-a-half weeks.

They were relying upon events *objectively* doing the work of raising the consciousness of the workers, i.e. spontaneity as a substitute for the *conscious* lead and fight for a clear strategy and tactics which is the hallmark of Bolshevism. The economism of SWM could hardly be better demonstrated!

Nor their dishonesty. For having supported the 'perspective' of the day of action, one might have expected some response to the outcome of the event. As the IWG predicted, it was a disastrous failure, with a *reduced* turnout in Derry and Belfast and no extended action of any kind, and by now nearly 50 days of the hunger strike had passed. No wonder the youth of Belfast and Derry began to riot! And yet not a word of explanation or account of the complete failure of the day of action appears in *The Worker*. So much for learning the lessons.

May '81: Bobby Sands' Death SWM's double somersault

With the death of Bobby Sands, mass demonstrations spontaneously occurred across the island. The disbelief and anger were palpable. The H Block leadership still placed its faith in O'Fiaich, Hume, and Haughey. Bernadette McAliskey informed the Catholic Church that "they were being given one last chance to act to save Brendan Hughes". At the May 1981 recalled H Block conference a resolution for a fight for the general strike was supported by SWM! Once more the action of the workers, and the death of a hunger striker prompting it, had 'convinced' them of the need for mass action to have a clear *focus* and direction. The resolution was opposed by Sinn Féin with the support of the USFI group and only narrowly defeated.

Following the defeat of the resolution, the campaign had squandered its last opportunity to give itself *any* kind of coherent direction, which could unify its forces in a last attempt to win. After Francis Hughes' death, the marches and rallies became more funereal, and passivity deepened, as each further death was awaited as inevitable.

This was the cue for SWM to once more switch. In an article "H Blocks: Which way for the campaign?" we are informed:

Unfortunately the level of industrial action to date has not been strong enough to drive home the message ... the H Block campaign nationally must set itself the goal that shop stewards and trade union reps are brought together locally to organize for **mass strike action**. Secondly the campaign must call for a one-day national stoppage ... Thirdly in the strong areas the campaign must seek to extend the stoppage and send delegates to other areas. (The Worker, June '81, p.5)

Nowhere is there a glimmer of understanding that the lack of direction of the campaign, and its lack of successful organization and contacts with workplace militants, might be due to its lack of a clear perspective of fighting to *link* all and every action by workers for an *all-out* struggle. Instead SWM put forward another 'day of action' in place of their earlier support for "a general strike". In view of the fact that *spontaneous* mass mobilization around the death of Sands and Hughes had

National H Block / Armagh Conference, Dundalk,
6 September 1981



declined, realizing the way the wind was blowing, SWM tacked towards the centre. Ever mindful that what was needed was *general* all-out action, they suggest the need to extend the one day of action *in the strong areas* —for how long they didn't say.

By the seventh death in the prisons even that putative hope had disappeared:

At the moment it is possible for the campaign to set up a major day of action ... and to work for as much industrial action as it can get on the day. ... the leadership of the campaign should issue a clear call for a day of action well in advance (The Worker, No. 11 p.4)

By the tenth death, after another H Block conference in September 1981 which had reaffirmed the bankrupt perspectives of the H Block leadership, Eamonn McCann informed us:

What we need inside the H Block campaign as well as public campaigning, is much more and more open and vigorous **debate** about the fundamental politics on which it is based, about political perspectives, not as a substitute for action but as a means of analysing our action and trying to determine how it should be **different** in future. (The Worker, no. 12, p.4)

On the same page SWM reports that the conference had, in fact, *passed* an SWM resolution for a Day of Action. So, except for the one moment when SWM supported the call for the general strike at the conference following the death of Bobby Sands, throughout the whole of the RAC and H Block campaign SWM was in basic agreement with the 'action' programme laid down by the H Block leadership.

SWM will, of course, claim that they argued for making the working class the centre of the campaign. But such mere aspirations are worthless in sharp struggle. In *deeds*, in their resolutions and actions they *opposed* every attempt *prior* to the hunger strikes to make the call for strike action the basis for building the campaign around the mobilization of the Irish working class. During the hunger strikes they followed the leftward move to call for sporadic industrial action but resisted any attempt to give such action any kind of *general* mobilising focus.

The hunger strikes brought growing sections of the masses spontaneously to the sharpest period of conflict for years, raising objectively the issue of partition, imperialism and the capitalist system in both states. It was elementary but crucial for revolutionaries to fight for the strategy and tactics that could develop the struggle to its sharpest form, bring the independent mass action of the working mass in workplace and communities to the forefront and challenge at every point the deadening grip of the trade union leadership, bourgeois and petit bourgeois nationalists and the Catholic Church. Central to that fight was the general strike. Only in this way could the objective and spontaneous forces emerging as the crisis developed be guided consciously to realize their own internal and dynamic logic, unique to class methods of struggle.

SWM never even recognized these tasks as part of its perspective. It was blind to the need, from the foundation of the Relatives Action Campaign, to offer clear *political* direction centred around the fight for working-class action. SWM's workerist platitudes in its bulletins and papers instead revealed the most cautious and timorous 'realism' that left it tailing the petit bourgeois nationalists of Sinn Féin.

Imperialism and Ireland : A Revision

The failure of the H Block struggle to mobilise the mass of workers in the south led SWM to question the connection between the national struggle and the southern masses and thence to write off the role of imperialism in the southern state. The new position was put forward in a document of Nov. 1982—*The Nature of the Southern State*—which was adopted by SWM conference without any reference to their ten-year-long belief that the South was a 'neo-colony' and 'imperialized'. In it, Allen defines the problem:

In the late sixties there was considerable optimism among both socialists and republicans that the struggle in the North against Stormont would eventually spill over into an all-Ireland struggle against British imperialism. The formula seemed relatively straightforward. The North was oppressed politically and militarily by Britain. The South suffered from the same oppression, but in an economic form.

Yet with the exception of the mobilisation after the shooting of 13 civilians in Derry on Bloody Sunday and the smaller, but in many ways more significant, support for the H Block hunger strike—it has not happened. Furthermore, in both these cases, Southern workers were demonstrating their sympathy and solidarity rather than making connections with an economic imperialism which dominates in the South.

The problem Allen was posing was very real but in seeking an answer he ignored the responsibility of the left itself for the squandering of major opportunities of 14 years of nationalist revolt.

The question he poses, however remains important: is the southern state exploited by imperialism at all? The method he adopted was *not* to critically analyze the past positions of the Marxist left on these issues, not even SWM's own, but rather to simply ditch these positions under cover of demolishing the purely *nationalist* view of

Southern Ireland's relationship to Britain. He proceeds instead from *impressions* of a modernized southern economy and tries to show the problems of the class struggle in Ireland as no different than in other capitalist countries.

Allen argues that to be a "neo-colony" is to be subordinated to an imperialist power in such a way that (a) the country's economy is distorted, (b) much of its economic surplus is rendered to the imperialists, on whom (c) it becomes dependent; (d) it develops an "agent" or comprador bourgeoisie, and (e) the bourgeois rulers of the "neo-colony" are mere puppets of the imperialist power.

He repeats the phrase "neo-colony of Britain" and never asks whether Ireland may be exploited by a combination of imperialist powers. By restricting "neo-colonialism" to the idea of a "puppet" relationship between the metropolitan power and its ex-colony he contrives an easily-demolished case against Republican nationalism which portrays the Dublin regime as a 'puppet' of London.

The "puppet regime" has not been typical of the semi-colonies in the post-1945 world, for very good reasons. The direct re-construction of the world economy by US capital and under US hegemony meant forcing Britain and France and the other old colonial powers to end their direct control of colonies and remove all obstacles to US capital and trade. In this way many colonies became politically 'independent' semi-colonies (to use a term of Lenin's) dominated simultaneously by both the USA and the former colonial power, and dominated principally through economic mechanisms.

In conditions of economic expansion the imperialist power does not normally need to directly manipulate the semi-colonial ruling class by military and political threats. In situations of crisis, however, it readily resorts to gunboat diplomacy, blockades, the installation of puppet regimes, such as operated in South Korea, South Vietnam, Nicaragua under Somoza etc.; or war, as against Iraq.

Semi-colonial bourgeois regimes display a wide range of variation in their degree of stability, democracy, collaboration with the old colonial master, or direct corruptibility by international capitalist interests. Semi-colonial development remains, however, subordinate to the interests of the imperialist powers. The consequences may not be revealed short of major economic crises. Marxists, however, cannot afford to discover the reality of latent national oppression only when it explodes in their faces—as in 1968-69!

Allen concludes that recent decades of such development have actually broken Ireland out of its "neo-colonial corner" and "integrated" it with world imperialism, making it a minor exploiter country rather than an exploited one. Thus the Irish bourgeoisie is credited with the achievement of developing the Irish nation in the teeth of imperialist competition. Such a conclusion is directly at odds with Lenin's understanding of the imperialist international division of labour in general and Trotsky's international perspective of permanent revolution, in both of whom understood that the bourgeoisie

in the backward countries was incapable of carrying through national development in an imperialist world order.

The IWG's analysis in *Class Struggle (paper no. 8)* restates how Ireland is dominated, and exploited overall, by imperialism, but not by limiting the question narrowly to Britain. Post-colonial Ireland could not overcome its profound dependence, even less in the "open door" period since 1958. A century of draining surplus labour and capital out of an impoverished backwater merely gave way to the creation of an enclave of international capital massively exporting its profits while the state piled up its indebtedness to international finance houses.

SWM attempts to reduce Irish society to an abstract model of a simple conflict of bosses and workers in which questions of national oppression have no organic or inherent connection with the class struggle. The Six Counties problem is seen as no more than an inflamed appendix which the class struggle will clean up when it shatters the bourgeois state. This is an economicistic schema which does violence to the reality of the struggle and to Marxist analysis.

In IWG's perspective the fundamental relationship of the south to imperialism may potentially lead to conflicts with imperialist powers. Such conflicts, entirely hypothetical at present, would be of enormous importance for the class struggle but also a great danger in diverting class politics into a cul-de-sac of radical nationalism.

The class struggle, politically, remains eclipsed by nationalist and populist alliances; ideologies rooted in rural life overshadow the urban; many aspects of cultural and intellectual life are impoverished and stunted; church power and women's oppression remain entrenched, and the vitality of youth is leached from society and from the class struggle by extremes of structural unemployment and emigration.

It would be wrong, of course, to expect the southern working class to automatically respond to the oppression of the Six-County nationalist minority in the way that republicanism predicted for so long. But it would be equally wrong to regard the class struggle in the south as independent and disconnected from the national struggle in the north. It is in that direction that SWM's analysis leads.

In SWM's simplified world schema, national divisions are largely irrelevant. The "straight fight" between bosses and workers in all countries will bring world revolution and questions such as national oppression can be resolved then. This is profoundly at odds with Trotsky's understanding of the national question. What he wrote in an article on the Ukrainian national question in 1940 might have been directed against precisely the economism of SWM tradition:

The national struggle, one of the most labyrinthine and complex but at the same time extremely important forms of the class struggle, cannot be suspended by bare reference to the future world revolution. (Trotsky, on the Ukrainian national question, 1940.)

CHAPTER SIX

Trade unions, the Bureaucracy and Reformism

Ireland's 'development' continued unbroken up to 1973, having opened up to foreign investment since 1958. Its 'boom' was produced by an upswing in economic and trade union militancy among wide sections of workers especially in the Republic, with a shift in the balance of the economy from agriculture to manufacturing for export. Nevertheless unemployment remained higher than anywhere else in western Europe and the majority of workers on the island, North and South, continued to politically identify with openly anti- or non- working class parties.

By 1971 the Irish Labour Party had declared itself, once more, ready to enter coalition with the openly capitalist and pro-imperialist Fine Gael. From 1973 to '76, world economic recession and exposure to EEC free trade blighted the working class with redundancies and closures and a rapid rise in prices.

These events alone, not to mention the struggle in the North and state repression and collaboration by the Southern bourgeoisie, posed real problems for a perspective like SWM's which saw the way forward through militant trade union sectional struggle for wages and conditions. Clearly *political* answers for the class as a whole were required, as SWM launched its paper in 1972, to face the mounting bosses' offensive for a second National Wage Agreement.

The first of these national agreements, through its centralized bargaining procedures, enabled the trade union bureaucrats to begin to take the struggle out of the hands of the shop stewards, especially in the face of inflation and ever larger catch-up claims.

One of the pernicious effects of inflation is that it further *divides* the working class, the strong from the weak, male from low-paid female, employed from unemployed. The bosses' claim that workers' demands for wage increases were responsible for inflation was echoed by the bureaucrats who, of course, had no intention of leading a fight for workers' resistance to the system which was responsible. The bosses' lies helped the bureaucrats sell the National Wage Agreement as an 'equitable' alternative to the 'dog eat dog' struggle of different sections of the class. Clearly what revolutionaries had to

argue for was political demands which countered the lies and sought to *unify* the struggles of the different sections. The fight for automatic compensation for price rises, the *sliding scale of wages*, had long been established in the revolutionary communist programme as the only adequate working class response to inflation. It was included among the tactical slogans of the Trotskyist programme in 1938.

One form of posing the 'sliding scale'—at the price levels of 1973-4—was to fight, across the board, for all workers to be automatically given £1 extra per week for every 1% rise in the consumer price index. This was linked to the idea of working class price-watch committees, involving housewives for example, taking action against price hikes and calculating their own cost of living index on the basis of a basket of necessities.

If substantial sections took up and these generalized class-wide slogans on wages and prices, even if such automatic 'indexation' of wages had been partially conceded as in Italy and Belgium, it would have been both a gain and a ceaseless bone of contention with a government and an employing class determined to lower wages and bring down inflation at the workers' expense.

Faced with rampant inflation of up to 24% a year, SWM dared not go beyond slogans such as: "Pay: use your muscle for more". They renounced with bell, book and candle those in their own organization who argued for the sliding scale of wages as a demand. The completely abstract call to overthrow capitalism plus the demand for large wage claims to be lodged by different sections of workers amounted to SWM simply *tailing* the existing trade union struggle for wages. They even argued that the demand for a sliding scale of wages if granted—a big if indeed—might put a stop to the wage struggle! It was elementary that revolutionaries should have fought to step up the existing fight for sectional wage claims, but faced with a class-wide *political* offensive by the bosses, workers needed to combine this with a class-wide *political* answer to inflation for the *mass* of workers. SWM rejected the only answer advanced by revolutionary communism.

Dublin's
biggest trade
union demo
200,000 on 20
March 1979



The Rank and File Movement

In 1972 SWM produced a pamphlet *Industry and the Trade Unions* which argued for a programme around which "a general fight by militants could be undertaken". It was produced after the Second National Wage Agreement had been accepted. It quotes Trotsky:

Capitalism can continue to maintain itself only by lowering the standard of living of the working class. Under these conditions trade unions can either transform themselves into revolutionary organizations or become lieutenants of capital in the intensive exploitation of the workers. The Trade Union bureaucracy which has satisfactorily solved its social problem, took the second path. (Trotsky — Trade Unionism in Britain)

The SWM pamphlet adds: "This passage could be written for Ireland today"—the clearest recognition by SWM that the task of revolutionary Marxists is to transform the wages struggle into a *revolutionary* struggle as the only permanent means of resisting the offensive of the bourgeoisie. Yet as soon as we turn to SWM's programme addressed to the militants of the class, a programme, they claim, for winning "control of the unions by the rank and file", we are told:

Revolutionaries must be careful not to confuse the role of Trade Unions. We must reject any trade union fetishism. The unions cannot offer a revolutionary programme. They cannot replace the party.

Of course, it is correct that trade unions are not political parties who fight for fully revolutionary strategy for the overthrow of capitalism. What Trotsky was arguing was, in the epoch of imperialism, for revolutionaries to arm the workers in the unions with a programme of demands and slogans starting from the immediate issue of the day but leading to a challenge to the foundations of the system as a whole. SWM's eagerness to draw a formal distinction between trade unions and the political party camouflages the fact that its programme for the rank and file was for no more than militant trade union reforms. Their most developed formulations are never translated into their action programme:

We have to recognize, however, that the fight for union reform and for the implementation of militant policies throughout the unions is a part of an overall strategy to develop working class consciousness and raise questions of political power among the working class. (SWM, *Industry and Trade Unions*)

And, in their formal programme:

SWM members agitate in the unions to build the fighting capacity and confidence of workers on the shop floor. Our aim is to point out how the smallest of struggles can become political, how political issues themselves can only be fought successfully through the workers themselves organizing to win industrial action; how they at the end of the day demand a challenge to capitalism and in particular to the bosses' state. Central to our task is the argument for solidarity. As the system stagnates it has become more difficult to fight workplace by workplace —solidarity becomes more crucial. For this reason the day to

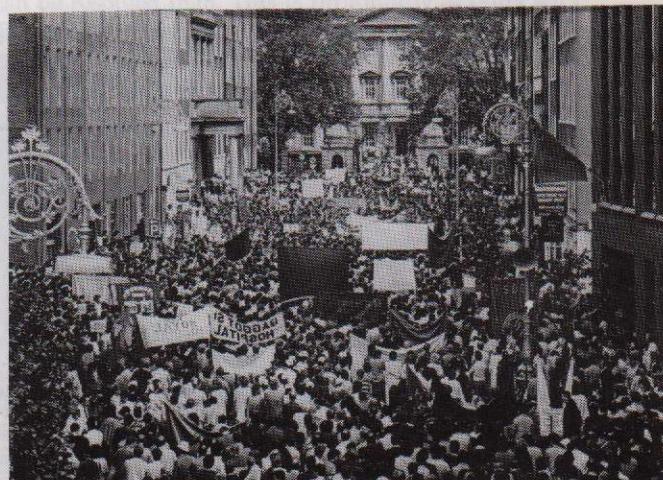
day work of SWM members in the workplace is to argue for collections and support for workers on strike. It is the building of a network of militants who understand that they are involved in a class battle against the bosses ... our aim in raising these issues is not to be super trade unionists. We above all are revolutionaries who seek to connect up all these immediate struggles with the fight for socialism. We fight to build the confidence and militancy of the rank and file in action to lead the struggles in the direction of the fight against the bosses and the state. (What We Stand For — The Rank and File Movement, 1974.)

Here SWM is forced to reject in theoretical terms the notion of 'super trade unionism' and yet their concrete conclusions confirm that their strategy for the rank and file is no more than 'super trade unionism'. It is focussed on servicing the existing *sectional* struggles, seeking to broaden them, in the belief that rank and file confidence may spontaneously make the struggle *political*. The rank and file movement is, for SWM, no more than a *solidarity* movement to better and more democratically conduct the struggle of the class over wages and conditions.

SWM's argument for such a rank and file movement to be connected to "a political strategy" is no more than the ritual assurance that only a socialist society can offer an answer to the ills of the masses. In this schema, therefore, politics is the *maximum* programme of a planned, rational order of a workers' state, as against the anarchy of capitalism. As an answer to the *here and now* SWM can only offer a *minimum* programme of militant trade unionism. If their action programmes were taken up and fought for, nothing in them would *connect* the existing daily battles of the exploited and oppressed to a real challenge to the rule of capitalism itself.

For its first ten years, SWM was forced to respond to and intervene in a series of rank and file initiatives centred on shop stewards, usually organised 'unofficially', attempting to repeat the successes of the Dublin Shop Stewards Committee, and organising solidarity around key national strikes such as Alcan and the oil tanker drivers in Dublin port, even promoting its own 'rank and file' groupings such 'New Liberty' in the ITCWU. Always seeking to limit the perspectives of such groups to the most immediate tasks, or offering only moral invective against the bureaucracy, they built nothing and suffered the steady loss of their trade union activists.

Mass Anti-Cuts demo, 1987



Nothing had been built, therefore, capable of offering an alternative leadership to the bureaucracy, when workers spontaneously marched out in their hundreds of thousands in the great tax demos of 1979. The bureaucracy was shocked to find 20,000 workers turning out to a taxation protest on Sunday 11 March 1979 and scarcely managed to put itself at the head of over 200,000 who struck and marched on Wednesday 20th and the thousands who struck again on May Day.

The taxation issue was but a temporary focus for workers' cumulative frustrations with wage restraint, a new surge in unemployment and soaring prices and their open recognition that the crisis was being solved at their expense and to the benefit of the wealthy. This utterly unprecedented wave of mass protest, however, was brought step by step under the control of an ICTU committee and deliberately called off, without meeting any significant organised resistance from rank and file organisation. Spontaneous economic struggle had precisely not clarified in time the questions of organisation or the necessary line of march—nor had SWM's propaganda which consciously postponed such issues until the masses should have already gone into battle.

In the period after the H Block struggles, as new attacks and cuts rained down on the class under the Labour-Fine Gael Coalition, workers failed to fight back amid deep cynicism at the memory of the ICTU sellout of the tax demos. When wider layers felt the knife extending into the hospital services, a new upsurge of protest in 1987 found SWM utterly unwilling to initiate any campaign to attempt to give the protests a lead. Once more the ICTU called them off and concluded the first of a new round of much more deeply collaborationist agreements with the Government, the *Programme for National Recovery* (1987-90) and the *Programme for Economic and Social Progress* (1990-93). On each occasion, even where committees of activists attempted to organise resistance to these deals, SWM refused to commit the support of its members, camouflaging its profound sectarian self-interest with self-fulfilling abstractions about a "down-turn" in the class struggle.

Failing the test of leadership

In November 1985 a strike by cleaners in UCD was met with police action against the pickets. Eamonn McCann, a leading SWM public figure who joined in the pickets, was personally injunctioned by the courts and ordered not to enter the campus. In the court he undertook to respect the injunction, publicly accepting the denial of his basic democratic rights. SWM did not even mention his action, not to say explain it, in its paper, even though it was prominent in the bourgeois media.

For a group calling itself revolutionary, and which has always called on workers to defy injunctions, this was shameful. SWM replied to an IWG member that they are not in the business of making martyrs. That is, not until the workers do so first! As with so much of their "practical action", SWM always sees the "real struggle" as only existing in the future when they have built their "party".

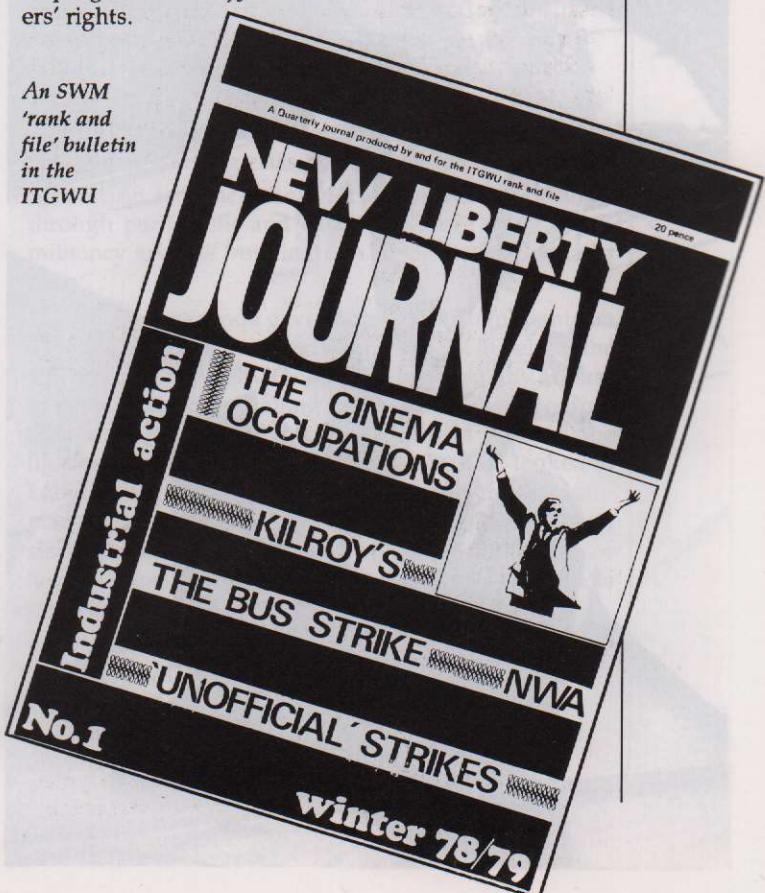
In December 1987, an SWM worker member in Waterford Docks was one of four jailed in Mountjoy for picketing in defiance of a court injunction. A solidarity campaign was started, with the IWG supporting it by, for example, leafletting a major teachers' union conference.



It had hardly begun to get its propaganda out when, after only 11 days, the workers purged their contempt. Their sacrifice was squandered.

On the night of their release the jailed SWM picketer told a solidarity meeting, convened to plan further action, that he had purged his contempt to get released because they 'could do more outside'. SWM justified his action by claiming there was 'a lack of support outside', even though the solidarity campaign had only existed for a week! SWM went further and argued that the dockers would have to find tactics that *avoided defying the law*. Their own report on the affair (SW 43, Jan '88) made no attempt to explain why they did not advise or instruct their member to continue his resistance even into a third week until the potential for solidarity action could be tested out in struggle. It simply repeated the patently untrue nostrum that the prisoners "would be more useful in Waterford speaking to other workers". Quite the contrary, this was the last that was ever heard of the unofficial dockers' action and campaign!

It was an important battle to defend the right of secondary picketing, for which workers were jailed. Shortly afterwards, the Industrial Relations Bill abolished many of the legal immunities of such picketers. SWM thus funk'd the responsibility of leadership at an important moment, yet it had always called *on workers* in its programme to *defy* the attacks of the courts on workers' rights.



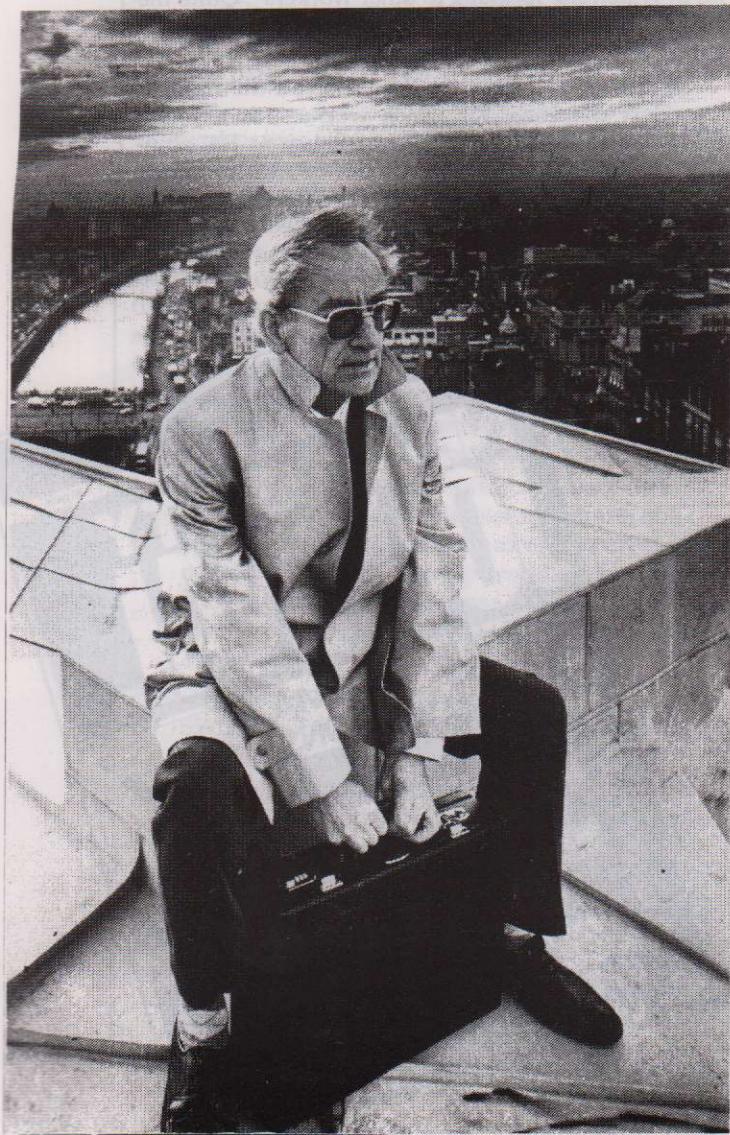
Syndicalism and the Trade Union bureaucracy

It might at first seem curious to accuse SWM of political adaptation to syndicalism, which sees militant trade unionism as the means to overthrow capitalism and not a mass movement led by a revolutionary party. After all, is SWM not a political organisation, openly proclaiming its goal to be state power, insisting that without a revolutionary party, soviets and workers' control of production there can be no workers' state?

Certainly SWM is not a classically anarcho-syndicalist formation denying the need for either political action or the proletarian dictatorship as in the pre-1914 French CGT and American Wobblies. Yet syndicalism, as in England and the Socialist Labour Party of DeLeon in the USA, was able to combine syndicalist practice in the unions with political, including electoral, propaganda.

We have already seen how SWM's prescription for building a democratic rank and file movement in the unions did not go beyond militant trade unionism. We can better explain the syndicalist limits of SWM's politics

John moneybags Carroll, saying goodbye as ITGWU/SIPTU president. His final year's salary and car were worth £95,000



from their wrong understanding of the nature of the trade union bureaucracy.

The fight to democratize the trade union movement in Ireland as elsewhere is an article of faith of revolutionary Marxists in the Trotskyist tradition. But it is necessary to understand precisely the real nature of the stratum of "leaders" who make up the union bureaucracy and their role within the capitalist system. SWM correctly points to their unelected, privileged positions, their isolation from the union membership and life styles more like those of the bosses. They point out, too, that the bureaucracy has a professional role in negotiation with the employer over the terms and conditions of selling a commodity—the labour power of the employees. From this they conclude:

The operation and continued existence of negotiation machinery depends on a degree of trust. The official has to develop this trust with the employer and insist that his members stick to the bargain. Literally his job depends upon it. ... The result is a conservative bureaucracy at the top of the union that stifles the activity and struggle of the rank and file. Procedure, arbitration, the Labour Court machinery, becomes everything—the confidence at shop floor level is relegated to second place. (What We Stand For)

This attempts to explain the origins of the trade union bureaucracy as a result of the division of labour within the bargaining process. The practice of bargaining requires organisation, and this inevitably leads to bureaucratic self interest in compromise.

This approach of SWM has more in common with sociology than Marxism, turning its back on the decisive historical conditions which gave rise to trade union bureaucracy as the material basis for the development of *reformism* in the metropolitan and international working class.

Lenin argued historically that the exploitation of the backward regions of the globe enabled the developed capitalist nations to create at home, to buy off, a stratum of skilled and relatively privileged workers. Their lifestyle was the material basis for the new *ideology* of peaceful coexistence with capitalism—*reformism*. This conservative world view dominated the most skilled sections of the working class who were also historically the most permanently organised section of the class. Their trade unions defended their sectional interests even by excluding the semi-skilled, unskilled, women and blacks until the new syndicalist movements mobilised the unskilled. Even in the new mass trade unions, as long as the militancy of the unskilled failed to find permanent expression in a revolutionary leadership, the organisations were easily monopolized by officials. Eager to join the labour aristocracy, the officials playing upon sectional interests raised themselves as a *bureaucracy* beyond democratic accountability to the mass of workers and freed themselves from any pressure to defend the *general* interests of the working class.

The decisive feature of this *bureaucratic caste* has been its systematically *reformist* world view. Centrally they insist upon the separation of party and political struggle for socialism from the 'economic' struggles of trade unions on the bread and butter issues of the day. Lenin pointed out how the reformist parties and union

leaders, as *lieutenants of capital* in the working class, act as the crucial 'safety valve' of the system when it is faced with the anger of the masses. Together the reformist bureaucracy and parties are the key means to prevent the working class coming to grips with the system.

In the imperialist international division of labour under modern capitalism, the bureaucratic castes play just as significant a role in Ireland and the backward semi-colonial countries even where the *labour aristocracy* which Lenin identified as the social base of reformism is much weaker than in the metropolitan imperialist countries. Indeed, the relative weakness of reformist parties in many such countries makes the trade union bureaucracy the main expression of reformism.

SWM's notion of the bureaucracy as inherent to the functioning of trade unionism obscures how such trade unionism itself evolved as a defence of labour aristocratic interests, and more fundamentally reflects a failure to grasp the Leninist and Trotskyist understanding of reformism. In fact, the Cliff tradition explicitly repudiates Lenin's analysis of the question. This is what also leads SWM to *ignore* key questions of how reformism in the shape of the Irish Labour Party remains a major obstacle to socialism.

The syndicalism of SWM leads to a shallow, contingent hostility to the bureaucracy. Its programme for a rank and file movement essentially proposes democratic checks and balances upon the leadership of the unions and *more militant* tactics; but that cannot be the limit of communists' perspectives for the rank and file movement, which must seek to put the mass organisations of the workers on a footing of *revolutionary* action against the capitalist system itself.

From a communist standpoint, out of the need for a political struggle to overthrow the bourgeoisie and its state power, union democracy must be seen as necessary not only to prevent sell outs and to control the bureaucrats. Workers need a 'general staff of labour' that leads, mobilizes and fights for class answers instead of the odious and impotent manoeuvrers of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). There must be a struggle to abolish and dissolve the bureaucracy and *replace it* with a militant communist leadership. Such leaders must fight to guard and promote the *workers democracy* which alone can make the unions schools of struggle and socialism.

In the struggle with the union officials, revolutionary politics as a guide to action are decisive. A *transitional* action programme for the unions and in the workplace must address all the vital fronts of struggle, not just wages, jobs and conditions. It means raising in the rank and file movement also the need for class action for women's liberation, to resolve the national question and defend all oppressed groups; international solidarity and action against imperialist war. It calls for explicit tactics to challenge the political obstacle of the reformist parties, particularly through the fight for a workers' action programme and through united-front electoral tactics. There is no other basis for ousting the bureaucracy and clearing the way to transform the trade unions into organs of revolutionary struggle.

Such a perspective, opening up the road of struggle for soviets, a Workers' government and armed workers' insurrection, must be put forward if we are to create a



Union bosses John Carroll and Michael Mullen marching with left-Labour Michael D Higgins

revolutionary communist leadership within the rank and file movement and the trade unions as a whole.

Labour and Reformism

The zig-zags of SWM, over 20 years, on electoral tactics, graphically reveals their adaptations to the prevailing climate and a 'method' utterly unrelated to the revolutionary tradition.

Expressing the hostility of the left sections recently disillusioned with Labour, among whom it recruited its first branches, SWM opposed a vote for Labour in 1973. Their call in all elections was to 'vote left'—meaning Official Sinn Féin, the Stalinists of the Communist Party and Provisional Sinn Féin, as against Labour. After the '73 election, *The Worker* noted that

[Official] Sinn Féin has been to some extent successful in portraying itself as a left-wing party. (Not that the Labour Party is left-wing; it certainly is not. But many of the Labour Party's supporters vote for it because they think it stands for the working class. (No. 12 March '73).

It went on to attack the Officials' belief in socialism through parliament and called for more trade union militancy and the building of a revolutionary socialist party.

Such propaganda gave no guidance to militants on how to fight reformism, and in practice fell in behind the 'left' reformism of the Officials who had virtually no base in the working class, calling for a vote for them because they were 'more left'. Meanwhile SWM ignored the illusions of the workers who, they admitted, looked to Labour, the party of the trade unions, which then commanded more votes from workers in 1973 than ever since. There was no discussion of how their illusions or how Labourism as the political expression of the whole trade union movement, were to be challenged.

Again in 1977 in *The Worker* Election Special:

There will be many workers and trade unionists who will consider voting Labour as "the party of the working class". But a vote for Labour is a vote for Coalition.

There is only one option for trade unionists and militants who are voting in this election, and that is a protest vote for those candidates who at least verbally have put themselves on record as being opposed to wage restraint and repression. That in the main means the IRSP, Communist Party, Sinn Féin and independent Labour candidates such as Merrigan and Browne. And in particular we urge Worker readers in Limerick to vote for Joe Harrington, candidate for the local workers' paper Bottom Dog.

In June 1981 we again read in *The Worker*:

Vote as left as you can, for H Block candidates, for Socialist Labour Party or Communist Party candidates, for Independent or Revolutionary socialists, for individual left labour candidates where there is no alternative. (No. 9 p.8)

Of course it was vital to give electoral support to the candidates of the H Block movement, as part of a united front tactic towards significant sections in struggle against imperialism. SWM, however, lumped such support with the meaningless pseudo-leftism of voting for the rump Socialist Labour Party or the CP which had no support whatever.

The Feb '82 election special reveals SWM caught out by their own logic—sickened by the politics of the Official Sinn Féin/Workers Party which SWM had always portrayed as more 'left' and more worthy of a vote:

'Sinn Féin the Workers Party' believe that they can make real gains in this election by going for the traditional Labour vote. They claim to be the only workers' party in this election. They are nothing of the sort. Their aim is an Ireland run by a State-Capitalist regime, where workers would make sacrifices to push forward industrialisa-

tion. Their unelected union officials have constantly sold militant striking workers down the river. They lambasted the oil workers as being ultra-left. They have aligned themselves with the Unionists in the North in calling for a devolved government and a reformed RUC. They totally opposed the H Block campaign. Don't be taken in by words, it's action that counts.

In this election, the only option open to militant trade unionists and socialists is to protest vote. A high vote for candidates who say they stand against unemployment and wage cuts and for the withdrawal of the British army from the North will at least be a signal and an encouragement to fight. Such candidates include some independents like Séan Corr and Bernadette McAliskey. Also worth a protest vote are candidates from the IRSP, Sinn Féin and the Communist Party.

In *Socialist Worker* (Feb '87, no. 32 p.3) after ritual criticism of the Workers Party and Sinn Féin, we are told:

In the general election we urge workers to vote left—number one for Sinn Féin, number 2 for the Workers Party. A high protest vote for these parties will be taken as a sign of resistance to the attacks we face. But we also need to build a much clearer revolutionary socialist alternative.

The same paper, on page 5, for the first time, and under pressure from SWP's changing line towards Labour in Britain, in reaction to Thatcher's offensive, for the first time tries to analyse the significance of the Irish Labour Party:

In the coming general election their vote will shrink further. No socialist will shed any tears for them. But they are not going to disappear, for two

Labour
Party
Confer-
ence,
1985



reasons. First the trade union leadership needs the Labour Party. It is a lever into government. It offers the prospect of a 'political road' where limited reforms can be won by horse-trading rather than struggle. The idea of the Labour Party as the political wing of the trade union movement helps to cement the division between political party and economic struggles. That is why the ITGWU bureaucrats may grumble about the Labour Party but the union machine will be put at its disposal at election time and beyond. The second reason why Labour won't disappear is the Labour Left. The Labour Left always hold out the hope that the party can be kept out of coalition and eventually find its soul. After the approaching electoral disaster, watch out for the party's new left turn and its agonising about where it is going.... Labour is a graveyard for socialists.

Finally, in 1988 Labour is re-admitted to SWM's definition of 'the left', even though it was now moving more rightwards and expelling the *Militant* tendency:

In the outlook period it is probable that a number of workers will move away from supporting Fianna Fáil and look for a pole of opposition. This presents great opportunities for the Left. Even in electoral terms, the fact that half the working class were no longer solidly voting for FF would give the idea of class politics and the prospects for workers' resistance a terrific shot in the arm. For that reason, in Southern elections we will be saying "Vote left", (Labour, Workers Party, Sinn Féin, expressing no preference.) (SW 45 p.9)

SWM's advice was always to vote for what seemed at the moment to be a *more left-wing programme*, even if it

was just the left-rhetoric of treacherous groups such as the CP or the Officials/SFWP who had no allegiance from any significant section of the working class.

The method of Engels, Lenin and Trotsky in elections was to give critical support to those reformist parties in whom the mass of workers, or the active vanguard, had active or passive illusions (where revolutionaries had not yet a base of support for their own candidates). Such mass support existed for none of the 'lefts' for whom SWM called for a vote (except perhaps the Workers Party after 1987)! Labour's hold on the passive support of workers in Ireland has been much weaker than in Britain, but all the more important because the (maximum) 17% voting Labour has been the only class-wide expression of opposition to the openly capitalist parties in a backward country.

Critical support means precisely giving *no approval* to the *programmes* of the reformists, no preference between their more or less radical phrases. It means distinguishing them in terms of how they relate to the working class and to *real struggle*. It means standing with the workers who have illusions in reformist leaders, voting with them against the capitalist parties—centrally to win a hearing for to our programme of *struggle* which puts the reformists to the test of action and of office! No other method can prove to workers that reformists will never defend their gains or create the kind of party that is needed.

By contrast, SWM's rudderless record in elections is a chemically pure example of *centrism*—somersaulting and contradicting itself to blend with the mood of the 'left' milieu in which it struggles to justify its own existence.

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for world socialist revolution*

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Struggle for Women's Liberation

After the Act of Union of 1801, followed by Catholic Emancipation, systematic collaboration was pursued between the Catholic Church in Ireland and the Imperial administration, to their mutual advantage. The Church gained control of the developing educational and health services, installed itself as the political broker of the oppressed masses at local level and regulated many aspects of social life, especially sexual relations and marriage. The clergy found strategic common cause with Britain in cultivating a conservative and stratified farming class as a bulwark against agrarian and national revolution and as a powerful basis for the privileges and power of the Church hierarchy. The intensified oppression of women was the single most dramatic feature overall of this developing social order.

The aborted national revolution of 1916-21 installed an explicitly Catholic semi-colonial bourgeoisie which had even more desperate need of the Church as an ideological and social bulwark against the discontent of rural and urban masses confronted with persistent economic stagnation and still inflamed with a legacy of syndicalist and revolutionary nationalist struggle.

Cementing its alliance with the Catholic Church over a period of twenty years it enshrined Catholic social teaching in all areas of public life—schools, hospitals, child services, regulation of marriage, control of social services etc. The Irish Constitution of 1937 specifically singled out women as the domestic slaves of men. The constitution explicitly prohibited essential democratic rights of women to divorce, contraception and abortion.

Despite the dramatic changes in the social role of women dictated by capitalist development world-wide in this century, these traditional forms of social oppression of women have remained largely intact in Ireland along with much of its accompanying Catholic ideology. To this is added the specifically capitalist forms of oppression of women which oppresses them as a reserve of cheaper wage labour (not least as emigrants) and as unpaid domestic toilers.

Economic expansion after 1957 increased the numbers of women wage workers, but legal reforms were conceded in extremely restricted form by the bourgeoisie under pressure of EEC conventions—including ineffectual legislation for equal pay.

In the new period of capitalist instability since 1971, women's gains have been attacked in every material aspect. Mass unemployment, poverty, social spending and health and education cuts have imposed their greatest burdens on women both as service workers and as domestic toilers and carers. In such conditions of deepening reliance on the family by the most exploited and impoverished sections, ideological reaction has gained strength. The defeat of the referendum

to allow divorce was but the sharpest of a whole series of failures to realise reforms in the existing forms of legal oppression maintained through Church power in contradiction with the modernising pressures of the internationalising economy of Ireland.

Feminism and women's liberation movements have been exceptionally weak in Ireland by comparison with Britain despite the pervasive penetration of British cultural influences in Ireland. This reveals the ambivalent position of the Irish petit bourgeoisie and the weak but very international Irish industrial bourgeoisie in relation to modernisation and their deeply compromised relations with and dependence on Catholic social power.

The failure of reform movements to win even the most internationally accepted legal rights of women on contraception and divorce emphasises all the more that there can be no substitute for mobilising *working class* women to lead the struggle for women's liberation. Nor can the special oppression of women ever be in practice a *separate* question for such a movement of struggle. It is intimately linked at every point to the struggle of the working class as a whole against rural and urban poverty, against unemployment, for defence of social services, for democratic control of the health services, for full unionisation, workplace creches and equal pay. Only linked to the struggle on these issues can the struggle for woman's social and sexual liberation be seriously taken up. By the same token, the raising of only direct economic concerns among organised women workers would be to *sacrifice* the struggle for central elements of the liberation of working class women and strengthen the ruling alliance of Church and capitalist state against women on all fronts.

Only a political leadership clear in the scientific understanding of *how* women's oppression is rooted in a specific form in capitalist society and *why* the bourgeoisie will oppose women's emancipation, can resist the enormous and grinding material and ideological pressure of Irish conditions to turn away from the working class to sections of other classes for a substitute, or to defer the question of women's liberation to a future stage of the class struggle.

Measured against this political, economic and social reality, SWM's 20 year record on the woman question reveals a constant veering in response to pressure and the complete failure to understand, let alone fight for, a coherent class perspective, strategy and tactics. The sharpest issues of women's oppression in Ireland got scant attention in the early published 'programme' of SWM.

It was only in 1973 in reaction to the dramatic actions of the small but prominent Irish Women's Liberation Movement that SWM began cautiously to see women's oppression as a concern of its propaganda work. In fact only in 1974 when the Labour Party in Coalition brought a bill before the Dáil did SWM attempt to address the matter of contraception seriously.

SWM saw the fight for "equal pay" as the only issue which could connect its politics to women, i.e. they had to be won around the 'bread and butter' issues of trade union wages and conditions. At its 1975 conference 'Opposition Group' resolutions calling for both a serious fight in the labour and trade union movement for contraception, and for abortion on demand to be included in the party programme, were passed; but characteristically the leadership continued view it as "too early" to raise the issue of contraception among the workplace rank and file. It was not prepared to fight for a broad united campaign which would include as its *key* perspective the fight to bring workers, trade union groups, women workers, the Labour Party to the forefront of such a campaign.

A year later, adapting to a changing consciousness on the left, SWM announced its support for the initiative of the radical *feminist* ginger group Irishwomen United, to launch a campaign—the Contraception Action Programme. This was organised by the Irish section of the USFI which consciously espoused *feminism* and rejected any *class* perspective on the struggle. From 1977 SWM began to increasingly fall under the influence of feminism—under the influence of the SWP in Britain and under pressure to adapt to its new audience within the Socialist Labour Party.

In Britain the SWP, after two decades of crude economism on the woman question, adapted to feminism which was by the mid 1970s a powerful current among the largely university educated left. In 1977 SWP launched local *Women's Voice* groups around a party-magazine of the same name. Its local groups were a response to pressure from the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM).

The new paper aimed to become a "socialist" *Spare Rib*, but rather than being the means of taking revolutionary Marxist ideas and traditions into the Women's Liberation Movement it became a vehicle for bringing feminist theories and practice into the SWP. When the SWP leadership recognized this, rather than fight to turn *Women's Voice* groups into organizations of militant working class women supporting a revolutionary programme, they liquidated their independence and reduced them to "sister organizations" of the SWP in 1979. By 1981 SWP decided that *any* separate organization for work on women was wrong in *principle*. Voice groups were closed down. When recruits looked likely from the WLM SWP had given free rein to the feminists within the party, but when WV looked like being an obstacle to recruitment a pseudo "Bolshevik" attitude to the women question was restored. SWM followed a similar road.

In Ireland, by 1978 the issue of contraception had become a focus for new agitation among feminists as the Haughey government sought to introduce 'reforms' which in reality were little advance on the status quo. SWM's attempt to ingratiate themselves with this milieu was soon obvious:

We are revolutionary feminists. We see that the fight for women's liberation is linked up with the working class movement for its own emancipation. We believe that it is only working class women who will lead the fight for women's liberation. ... What we need is an organization that will organize women on a working class perspective and will work to win women to revolutionary socialism (Socialist Worker Review, No. 3, p.13)

In 1980 when SWM re-emerged again from the SLP as an independent organization it openly declared the need "to build a women's movement".

The problems that confronted feminists in Ireland start from this point. A militant women's movement can only come about if it is prepared to direct its appeal to the broad mass of working class women ... The beginning can start now in the Feminist Federation [a grouping of the far left and feminists under the aegis of USFI group] which has brought together those who stand for militant action. But it needs to transform itself ... that means organizing itself on open activist basis prepared to throw all its energies into organizing around issues from a feminist standpoint. (The Worker, Oct 1980 p.5)

By 1983 all talk of feminism disappears from SWM perspectives. Its position up till then of "we support feminism as being the legitimate progressive and necessary struggle by women" and their call to build a 'feminist movement' to organize women were replaced by the abstract socialist maximum:

We believe that only through socialism can women achieve full emancipation and that their struggle is part of the whole class struggle for socialism" (The Worker. What We Stand For. Jan/Feb '83)

SWM, like SWP earlier, had returned to economist orthodoxy—*no separate women's organizations* should be built, either of a "politically autonomous" character with which SWM openly flirted between 1978 and 1982; *nor* of a working class character, such as the mass working class women's movement advocated by the IWG and openly opposed by SWM in debate in the Socialist Labour Party.



It might be suggested that the obvious zig zags of the political line of the SWP reflected healthy debate and internal discussion. Tellingly, at no time did SWM explain, let alone publicize, the reasons for its *changes* of political position on serious matters of programme. Such explanations are not a luxury but a duty. Admitting mistakes and analyzing the reasons for them is the only means through which lessons can be learned and a mistaken *method* corrected.

As we have pointed out neither position, economism nor feminism, could chart a principled way forward on the issue of women's oppression. SWM returned to its orthodox *workerist* positions, but now adding a formal programme of women's rights. Faced with the burning issues of the 1980s for women—the abortion Amendment, Divorce and the attack upon the pregnancy counsellng Clinics, it was to tail behind liberal and feminist campaigns and solutions, indulging at times an ultra-left rhetoric that covered its tactical incoherence.

The Anti-Amendment Campaign.

In 1981 the Pro-Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC) and its powerful backers levered Haughey into announcing a referendum to copperfasten the Irish constitution against any possibility of reforming the law on abortion. They feared such reforms might arise from the European courts or as a concession to radical minorities holding the parliamentary balance of power. SWM's abstract response presaged their later opportunism:

It has relatively little to do with abortion because its effects on the situation here would be negligible—abortions are simply not being performed as it is and it could not prevent women going to England for one. What it represents is a backlash against the growing confidence to make demands and the developing awareness and sympathy for the plight of women with unwanted pregnancies. (The Worker, June 1981 p.2)

The first of these points became the argument of the major forces of liberals and churchmen of the Protestant faith who were to make up the Anti-Amendment Campaign. Of course, it was true that the law outlawed abortion, and there was no movement for clinical abortion facilities or for pro-abortion change. But to conclude that the Pro-Life Amendment drive was not really about abortion was an affront to the intelligence. Already 30,000 or more had travelled for abortions since the 1967 reforms in Britain. The right was moving to attack all those likely to travel for abortion and the pregnancy counselling services who assisted them. SWM's position, however, was not a mere weak judgement of the matter. It was, in fact a rationale for its opportunist support, in practice, of the Anti-Amendment Campaign.

The campaign was founded on the simple demand for 'No Referendum' and its leading spokespersons from the liberal bourgeois camp including the Protestant churches all regularly proclaimed their *opposition* to abortion—an opposition that they were quite happy to see continued in the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act. Thus from its very foundation the campaign deliberately ducked the very issue which PLAC, the Church and Fianna Fáil had chosen as the ground of their fight. The

sponsorship of the Workers Party was to be expected, given their desperate reformist search for 'respectability'; but the self-proclaimed revolutionaries of SWM (and the USFI group) joined the campaign on a platform which centrally portrayed the referendum as merely an undemocratic attempt by one Church to impose its stricter anti-abortion morality on followers of other churches and of none.

SWM initially proposed that the Anti-Amendment Campaign stand for "abortion on demand". This was not posed in relation to principled struggle on the issues of the day. No sooner was it rebuffed than SWM fell into the role of foot-soldier for the liberal and the petit bourgeois supporters of Fine Gael and the Protestant clergy, despite its own criticisms of the Anti-Amendment Campaign:

Publicly it has hidden behind the more respectable arguments and flirted with the Fine Gael 'softs' ... through the smooth mouths of endless lawyers and reverends, the assumptions have been that the minority churches were the key to a successful campaign and that respectable legal and academic arguments were the most important. (The Worker, May '83 p.2)

Instead, SWM argues:

It is less the small minority churches that need to be won than the vast majority of ordinary "catholics" who knowing the realities of Irish abortion, rebel against the pontifications of their bishops. (ibid)

There was only one way to put this wishful thinking about 'ordinary catholics' to the test—by fighting to concretely challenge the existing legal prohibitions on abortion, while supporting the demands *No Referendum* and *No to the Amendment*.

As SWM did not believe the PLAC referendum was really an attack on abortion rights it could easily make correct criticisms of the Anti-Amendment Campaign but offered no concrete alternative.

Likewise the idea that the Amendment is wrong is a long way from the concrete winning of the kind of women's rights that so many people who are opposed to the amendment want ...

The winning of public opinion will guarantee us nothing. Even votes against the Amendment will be a statement, and only that. (ibid)

All too true as the Anti-Amendment Campaign, with its huge access to public opinion, repeated the message that the existing anti-abortion laws in the Republic were the best basis for protecting the life of the unborn. Realizing this SWM continued:

To begin to win the rights for women that opposition to the Amendment really means, a concrete campaign has to be built.

When? Clearly not in a fight to win those elements in the present campaign to demands which actually do address women's rights concretely, for SWM accepted the basis of the Anti-Amendment Campaign (AAC).

SWM can claim to have in fact attempted a campaign which did take up the issue—the *Women's Right to Choose Group*, which functioned for a few weeks in parallel with the Anti-Amendment Campaign. Unfortunately, it was disconnected from the actual battle. By contrast, the IWG

attempted concretely to link the issue of abortion to the existing issue.

This meant refusing to support the platform of the AAC, campaigning among and alongside its activists against the Amendment, but centrally trying to win them to take up the fight against the existing legal obstacles to abortion. While openly arguing that only *free abortion on demand* could answer the needs of women to control their fertility, the IWG recognised that the most active campaigners had yet to be won to this but would, if given a lead, be prepared to fight to *decriminalize* abortion even before resolving what kind of abortion provision should be positively fought for.

The IWG fought for this line of march in all the conferences, and attended with its own propaganda all rallies and marches. We argued that the correct platform for the campaign "must be one that fights simultaneously to repeal the existing laws that criminalize abortion and that prevent access to safe and free contraception on demand". Such a platform—a united front—would *not* have made it a pre-condition that members and supporters must agree to call for abortion facilities on demand. That is, while independently propagandising for free and legal abortion on demand, the IWG was arguing for an immediate joint campaign *centred* on working class action, for the slogans:

Cancel the Referendum

No to the Abortion Amendment

Repeal Section 58-9 of the 1861 Act

For free legal and safe contraception on demand.

Such we believe was a real basis for a fighting campaign of those who wanted to fight on the substance of the issue posed by the PLAC. It was a principled position which could unite both those who supported Abortion on Demand and those who while opposed to this, were still willing to oppose PLAC's purpose of stopping abortion by criminalizing women and attacking the pregnancy counselling services which counselled on the option of abortion.

SWM's Women's Right to Choose Group found itself without any bridge to link the immediate struggle to the fight for a working class women's movement that would raise the demand for abortion. In practice they fell in behind the opportunism of the AAC.

*Clinics Defence Campaign platform
at Liberty Hall, Oct. 1986*

Tailing the Feminists tailing the Liberals

Needless to say the Anti Amendment Campaign failed miserably. With the perspective offered by the IWG the result might not have been victory in the referendum, but such a campaign would have provided a focus for the best activists to be mobilized on a permanent basis around a clear perspective that could develop the struggle. Instead *nothing* survived from the AAC.

Throughout 1985 and 1986 SPUC worked its way through the courts to shut down the pregnancy counselling clinics and to outlaw every form of information about abortion facilities in Britain. The response, as with the AAC, came from the far left and feminists but with no perspective of struggle for abortion rights within Ireland. SWM declared:

The fight against SPUC won't be won by appealing to liberal consciences through talk of "the right to information" and by appealing to ruling class politicians who just happen to be women. It can be won by mobilizing the growing number of working class men and women who support the right of women to control their bodies, their lives. That means that the emphasis must be to insist that, in the absence of abortion in Ireland, Irish women have the right to access to the cheapest, safest, abortion available to them in England. (SW no. 17, August 1985, p.2)

In Oct. '85 a founding conference of the *Defend the Clinics Campaign* met to lay the basis "to defend the right to refer women to jurisdictions where abortion is legal until such time as these services are available in Ireland". Once again the USFI group acted as cat's paw against the left, defending the most timorous and cautious action—they proposed and won deletion of even the *token* reference to the future possibility of Irish abortion facilities.

An IWG motion sought to publicly commit the campaign to build on the immediate defence issues with a perspective of opening up the struggle to *decriminalize* abortion. The IWG argued firstly: 50,000 women in Ireland have had abortions; together with tens of thousands more they represented huge potential support for the slogan to defend the right to information on abortion.

students
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Secondly, most who were prepared to struggle against the Amendment and Defend the Clinics would campaign for decriminalization, if given a lead. Thirdly, a campaign turning out to the labour and trade union movement and women workers especially could draw real support for mass action. And fourthly, the real issue raised by the Referendum and the SPUC attack was the criminalization of women having abortion and all who assist them; it was no use before, and was no use now, to publicly pretend otherwise. (IWG *Class Struggle* journal no. 17)

SWM supported the need for mass defence but offered little beyond that suggestion. the IWG's motion was rejected. The resulting platform, like that of the Anti-Amendment Campaign, made no mention of the substance of the attack. The IWG concluded: "*The Clinics Defence Campaign has been set on a course towards demoralization and shipwreck*" (ibid).

Characteristically SWM makes no mention of the conference in the next issue of Socialist Worker (Nov. 1985) nor of the issues that divided the activists, nor what SWM fought for. A long article gives a history of contraception and abortion and tells us that:

it is also important to see the fight to defend the clinics not as a single issue campaign but part of the ongoing struggle for free, legal, safe available abortion here in Ireland. (ibid).

We are further informed:

You can no longer win the fight for women's rights in single issue campaigns ... for the attack on women's rights to control their fertility, their rights at work in the home or on the dole are connected ... they are all part of the same thing. We see the need for an organization to develop ideas, to inspire people when the struggle is difficult, to go on the offensive and encourage struggle when the opportunity arises. We see the need for a political party that will organize the best fighters to lead our struggles ... that is exactly what SWM is about. Join us and help win the struggle. (ibid)

And what of the Clinics Defence Campaign and the thousands of women under attack from SPUC? Not a concrete word or proposal.

Hamilton Judgement

In early January 1987 the Hamilton judgement in favour of SPUC was announced. It meant the legal prohibition on non-directive pregnancy counselling or any form of information on safe abortion facilities abroad. It needed to be met urgently by organized defiance, mass protest and direct action. SWM had this to say:

The Campaign should seek to build on the enthusiastic support shown at the public meeting and at the organizing meetings held to date. The groundswell of anger can be given a focus, and support galvanized into activity by striking back at the instigators of the attack on women.

SPUC should be picketed every time they crawl out from under their stones. The campaign should be broadened to include as many people as pos-

sible in mass defiance of the law ... the issue must be raised through the unions and union publications should print addresses and phone numbers for their members who might need them—all of these are tactics that by involving the maximum number of people in public flaunting of the law, effectively make an ass of it. That way individuals would not be victimized ...

As for SPUC it would help to take the wind out of their sails and halt the clerics for a bit ('Spuc Off' in Socialist Worker Feb. 1987.)

It is difficult to know whether to laugh or cry at this apology for a political line of march. It offer a campaign of moral outrage against the Right and its ideas and defiance of the law without any *political* goal being fought for. Certainly SPUC had to be challenged but it begged all the issues to presume that forces existed ready and willing to make the law unworkable—a law SWM itself admitted was backed by a ruling class fully determined to defend it.

It offered no alternative to the timid feminist and centrist leadership of the campaign which went even further down the road of retreat at the March conference where a long 'policy' document was suddenly produced and imposed in opposition to the fight of the IWG for the slogan of *Defiance, Defence and Repeal*. SWM opposed the IWG perspective. They argued, as on other fronts, that struggle was not possible in the 'downturn situation', although its own paper in March lamented the squandering by the campaign leaders of the spontaneous support both immediately before and after the Hamilton judgement. "*The ultimate in wasted energy was seen in the large and successful demo on 7th Feb.*" (SW March '87 p.1)

SWM's notion of a 'political' campaign still failed to specify any political goals or demands:

Build a clear, political militant campaign which will be open at all stages to the involvement of new activists which can then proceed to make this vicious law unworkable. (SW March p.1).

The campaign effectively liquidated by accepting the defeatist Ad Hoc Committee proposal, with its suggestion that at some future day circumstances would permit the raising of the demands argued by the IWG. It gradually became a network of information and ceased to be a campaign. *None* of the ad hoc committee's promise of 'demos, rallies public meetings, road shows, street theatres' ever materialised. They had no political focus to rally activists.

Defiance of the ban on abortion information by student unions led to prosecution by SPUC from 1987-89. Under threat of seizure of Student Union assets, the leading campus union, at TCD, gave up official defiance of the law. Information continued to be distributed 'unofficially'. SWM, with significant campus groups in UCD, TCD and UCC refused to fight for militant united action among student activists and the left, putting its own sectarian organisational interests above every political concern. Wherever it could get abortion phone numbers displayed in colleges or workplaces, it boasted the fact. Elsewhere as in University College Cork it undertook not to offend the College by giving out information. Politically, it *rejected* every proposal to raise resolutions in trade unions and student unions calling for repeal of the



8th Amendment which was the very basis for the ban on abortion information. Simple-mindedly it insisted on displaying the phone numbers and moralising against SPUC as the basis of the struggle.

In February 1992 the 8th Amendment exploded in the face of the Irish bourgeoisie when the Attorney General used it to have the High Court intern a 14-year old rape victim within Ireland to prevent her having an abortion in Britain. The "Dublin Abortion Information Campaign" created three months earlier by students and Anarchists woke up to find mass anger directed against the very anti-abortion laws against which the 'left' had refused to build any fight. It was the *bourgeoisie itself* which now articulated the opposition to the 8th Amendment—Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats.

Alone on the Irish Left the IWG raised the need to build a fight against both the 8th Amendment and the 1861 Act. On 5 March, when the Supreme Court finally demolished the absolute prohibition of abortion, it was widely acknowledged that the 1861 Act was, indeed, the fundamental legal obstacle. Had SWM, Peoples Democracy and Anarchists (*Workers Solidarity Movement*) taken up the kind of united-front platform advocated by the IWG since 1983 to smash *all* the anti-abortion laws, a serious advance could have been made for the struggle.

SWM, for its part, raised as their main slogan on posters and placards: *rape victims have a right to abortion*, which did no more than express popular sentiment. They tried to outflank all other groups by setting up their own *Scrap the Amendment* front-groups, with absolutely no success, but leaving it to the feminists to offer the only effective appeal for a national and broad campaign.

The Supreme Court's acknowledgement of a limited right to abortion meant that new legislation would be necessary. This changed the whole terrain of the struggle. A principled agreement which before might have been made to fight together for decriminalization, while disagreeing on what kind of positive abortion rights were needed, was now impossible. Any campaign had to address the decision of the Supreme Court.

In this circumstance the IWG, at the founding conference of the *Repeal the Eighth Amendment Campaign* on 8th March, 1992, put down two motions to commit the campaign to fight (a) for repeal of the 1861 Act (sections

58 & 59) and (b) for free abortion on demand. All the many SWM members present (along with Peoples Democracy/USFI) voted solidly *against both motions!* They did not even argue for the vague slogan in *Socialist Worker*—“*for a woman's right to choose*”.

SWM moved that the campaign should add to 'Repeal the 8th Amendment' the slogan “*for information and choice*”, and two leading members Holborow and Ryder assured the conference that “*choice does not mean a woman's right to choose abortion*”. These semantics drew an incredulous response, and on a first show of hands SWM's motion was lost. When it was then explained that it was already the slogan of the ICTU Women's Conference, the vote was retaken and carried.

Thus, at the moment when the issue of positive abortion rights was first posed in struggle in Ireland, SWM retreated behind a meaningless phrase approved by the Trade Union bureaucracy, not only did they oppose the call for free abortion on demand but they even refused to press for their own evasive formulation of “*a woman's right to choose*”. Once more, in practical struggle, they took their political line from the spontaneous consciousness of the activists around them and confirmed that, for SWM, the revolutionary programme is mere words.

Having refused to take any responsibility to offer leadership in the new struggle by arguing their own programme, SWM further decided on keeping only a minimum presence in the Campaign, one member in the leadership and no more than half a dozen, of more than 50 members in Dublin, in the Dublin action groups of the campaign. It sowed deep division in the campaign by pursuing confrontation on the streets with SPUC without attempting to win the campaign activists to joint mobilisation of democratically controlled action linked to the goals of the campaign. When the campaign action groups no longer seemed a fruitful arena for recruitment, by July 1992, SWM withdrew from the campaign, making it clear that its preference was for a larger movement on a more minimal political basis which did not necessarily insist on calling for repeal of the 8th Amendment. Its own sectarian organisational needs were now everything, its responsibility to the struggle nothing.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The Collapse of Stalinism

All programmes and theories about the USSR have been sharply tested by the collapse of the East European and USSR bureaucracies. Almost universally it is agreed that throughout the ex-USSR and Eastern Europe the new regimes are desperately struggling to re-introduce capitalism. All are facing difficulties of a historic order in setting in motion the most elementary features of capitalism—functioning capital, commodity and labour markets.

SWM, however, along with anti-Marxist Anarchists, are almost alone in the world in claiming that these societies are not in fact restoring capitalism. According to their schema, the USSR went back to capitalism in the 1930s and none of the other states were ever anything but capitalist—"state-capitalist", with a ruling class no different in essence from those in the west.

To any but the most blinkered observer, the economic and social convulsions of capitalist restoration from Lithuania to Vietnam, from Bosnia to Vladivostok daily attest the fundamentally different nature of economic relations in the Stalinist societies and the capitalist world. Savage reality makes a nonsense of the whole schema of 'State Capitalism' on which the SWP/SWM bases its whole world view.

Simple Observable facts?

When first developed in the '40s the theory (state capitalism) represented a clear break from the tradition of both Stalinism and orthodox Trotskyism. The theory wasn't derived from an academic analysis of abstract concepts. On the contrary, it arose from a consideration of the simple observable facts of the nature of the Eastern Bloc states. (Eamonn McCann in Socialist Worker, March 1990).

When Marx argued against the theories of bourgeois political economy in the nineteenth century he particularly attacked the vulgar empiricist belief, repeated by McCann, that the observable appearances speak for themselves. "If appearances were essences, there would be no need for science", Marx wrote.

Marx explicitly asserted the need for a whole system of abstract concepts to analyse what was the essential nature of capitalism. Abstract labour, concrete labour, use value, exchange value, surplus value, the commodity, exploitation—all were abstract concepts in Marx's scientific investigation in order to grasp the "grubby reality" of the capitalist mode of production. Without such concepts the scientific understanding so necessary to communist political activity would be impossible.

Unfortunately 'simple observation' has left generations of workers worldwide mistakenly believing, not that it was state-capitalist, but that the Eastern Bloc

represented 'socialism'. It is this which has made our tasks so difficult for several generations. Without the kind of theoretical analysis derived by McCann it is impossible to correctly understand the contradictions of the Stalinist societies.

The "Orthodox" Trotskyist view?

The orthodox Trotskyist analysis is held by only a small minority. ... It has been adopted by left intellectuals who acknowledge the crimes of Stalinism but they still cling to the notion that nationalisation equals socialism. (Socialist Worker 63, Jan 1990)

In fact it is those who believe the USSR to be "state capitalist" who are by far the "minority" among the tens of thousands of organised militants world-wide claiming to stand in the tradition of Lenin and Trotsky.

SWM is guilty of either philistine ignorance or downright deceit in equating Trotsky's position with the shoddy 'Communism with a human face' of 'left intellectuals' (Euro-Stalinists and left Social Democrats) who actually oppose everything that Trotsky stood for—the *revolutionary* overthrow of the bureaucracy, the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, and international revolution!

Trotsky detested the vulgar notion that nationalisation equals socialism. His claim that the USSR had not gone back to capitalism was based on the *combined* facts that the bourgeoisie had been removed from power by proletarian revolution and had not been recreated; productive property had been nationalised; but more importantly, production was now organised according to a centralised, though bureaucratic, plan, not by profit-driven market forces. The state monopoly of foreign trade protected these new property forms from penetration by external capitalism.

Trotsky explicitly rejected the attempt to describe the state property of the USSR as socialist property:

for the latter has its premise the dying away of the state as the guardian of property, the mitigation of inequality and the gradual dissolution of the property concept even in the morals and customs of society. The real development in the Soviet Union in recent years has followed a directly opposite road. Inequality grows, and together with it, state coercion. (Writings 1935-6, NY 1970, p.354)

Stalinist States More Progressive?

SWM claims that the tradition of Trotsky's followers has been to regard the degenerate workers' states as more progressive than the capitalist West; that Trotsky's view sees them as a half-way house to socialism.

In fact, Trotsky described Stalin's victory as a political *counter-revolution*. He likened Stalinism's repressive apparatus to that of fascism, though based on post-capitalist property forms. He exposed the *reactionary* role of the USSR under Stalin on a world scale and how Stalin sold out the proletarian revolution in China, France, Spain. The "*bureaucratically degenerated workers' state*" was thus a *counter-revolutionary* state. The repressive institutions and armed bodies which protect the political rule of Stalinism must be *smashed*. That is, these *states* must be smashed by workers' revolution. Neither Trotsky nor we who share his position regard the Stalinist states as "progressive", as distinct from the property relations on which they rest.

In any conflict with imperialism we take the side of the degenerate workers' states in order to protect the gains which remain from the overthrow of capitalism within them. Despite the reactionary nature of those states, there exists within them the forms of property which are *preconditions* for building socialism—not the only preconditions, but necessary, objective, material preconditions for developing a socialist mode of production. On a historical scale, these property forms are *progressive* relative to capitalism—even though, perverted by the Stalinist bureaucracy they hold back economic progress and subject the masses to poorer conditions than under developed capitalism.

On a historical scale, the reactionary Stalinist state undermined the post-capitalist property forms on which it rested. Effective defence of the post-capitalist property system was only possible through workers' political revolution against Stalinist state power.

Property form not fundamental to Socialism?

What is fundamental to Marxism and socialism is not the form of property as such (state ownership existed as far back as ancient Egypt) but the self emancipation of the working class. (SW no.63, p.5)

Throughout history, what has been *fundamental* to the advance of human society has been precisely the *mode of production* and how it defines the relationship of the social classes in production. This means precisely, "the form of property".

The *self-emancipation of the working class* is crucial in two respects, neither of which lessens the importance of the *form of property*. Firstly, as a general principle of history, the new form of property can only be created by victorious workers' revolution over the bourgeoisie (1917 being the *only* example yet in history). Secondly, and unique to socialism, the new mode of production can only be *developed* under the democratic control of the working class—the workers' democracy which Stalinism crushed.

Workers' States Without Workers' Control

A sentiment endlessly repeated at SWM public meetings runs as follows. *It is obscene to suggest that such anti-working class states could ever be described as workers' states of any kind. Whether Trotskyists call them 'degenerate' or not, calling them 'workers states' is outrageous.*

This argument starts out from a one-sided insistence only on the *subjective* or *political* conditions for socialism—active control by the workers. There are also *objective* preconditions for socialism. In the USSR etc. these still existed despite the political counter-revolution of Stalinism. For Marx, it was such objective features of the *mode of production* which determined the fundamental class character of a state.

Whether we call it workers' or bourgeois state is not a *moral* question of whether the state upholds the standards of proletarian socialism or is brutally oppressive of workers. It is not even a *political* question of which class directly exercises daily political power. The class character of a state is decided by which *forms of property* the state defends, the capitalist private property of the bourgeoisie, or the nationalised and planned property expropriated from the bourgeoisie and which can only realise its potential as socialism.

Even in a capitalist state the bourgeoisie may be denied all political control, its parties and press banned, its parliament suppressed as, for example, by fascist dictatorship, without undermining the capitalist mode of production. It remains a distorted *bourgeois* state.

The experience of Stalinism has tragically taught us the lesson that *workers' control* may also be suppressed in a state based on the abolition of capitalism, while remaining, in its *objective* essentials, a *workers' state*, but a profoundly degenerated one. The potential new mode of production is arrested in its development by the suppression of workers' control. The transition to socialism is decisively blocked.

Trotsky wrote that the USSR:

can be called a workers' state in approximately the same sense—despite the vast difference of scale—in which the trade union, led and betrayed by opportunists, that is, by agents of capital, can be called a workers' organisation. Just as the trade unions under capitalism are workers' organisations run by class collaborationist bureaucratic castes in the working class, so the USSR remains a state where the working class is the ruling class but where power is in the hands of a reactionary bureaucratic caste. (Writings 1935-36, NY 1970, p.360)

CHAPTER EIGHT

Trotsky's Analysis Proven Wrong?

Trotsky's perspective was that the World War would see the destruction of the USSR bureaucracy by either the workers or by imperialism. Instead Stalinism expanded. SWP/SWM argue that he was therefore wrong about the nature of Stalinism, and of the USSR as a degenerated workers' state.

Estimating the main lines of development in the period ahead is always a vital task for communists, but such perspectives are rarely borne out in the expected form and are constantly subject to correction—Marx after 1848, the Bolsheviks and the Comintern in 1920 etc. Finding their perspectives for the future to be wrong does not imply that they were wrong in their analyses, or in their principles about the revolutionary role of the workers or of the inherent crisis facing the capitalist world order.

The 1941-45 war between Stalin and Hitler demonstrated within the USSR all the contradictory features that Trotsky repeatedly discerned in the *degenerated workers' state*—the chaos of bureaucratic control; the surge of creative workers' initiative when the bureaucracy was dislocated in the most extreme emergency; the freeing of market mechanisms in agriculture; and afterwards, renewed purges directed against *both* capitalist tendencies and workers' independence, in order to re-stabilise Stalinist control.

The long-term expansion of Stalinism was possible because Germany had waged the war on two fronts to the bitter end and suffered defeat therefore on both, to Stalin's enormous gain in the east. The 'democratic' imperialists were too exhausted by 1945 to pursue the war eastwards. In 1941 the USSR came close to total defeat by Hitler. By 1944 a strengthened Stalinism was able to crush the very real revolutionary movements of workers right across Europe and to pursue its purges at home. In all the tendencies of the situation Trotsky's analysis was borne out but the overall historical outcome had not been predictable.

The originators of SWM's theory about the USSR ceased after 1947 to believe that Stalin's regime was a contradictory one balancing on the antagonism between world capitalism and a post-capitalist property system. They exaggerated the historic stability of Stalinism, claiming it was just another form of the established *capitalist* mode of production.

The present crisis of Stalinism rather confirms Trotsky's understanding of the contradictory nature of the Stalinist regime—a historically illegitimate ruling caste precariously balancing between world capitalism and a post-capitalist society in which the transition to socialism was blocked by national isolation and by their own parasitic role.



Soviet Armed Forces raise the red flag on the Reichstag 30 April 1945 but it would be another three years before Stalin was forced to liquidate capitalism from above in East Germany

Workers' States Without Workers' Revolution?

The East European states are a particular problem for SWM. Marxists, they claim, hold that only workers' revolution can overthrow capitalism—which is true *in general*. There was no such revolution in Eastern Europe, so, whatever about the USSR being a degenerated workers' state, the East European countries could in no sense be workers' states, they argue.

Trotsky lived to see Stalinism militarily liquidate the rule of the bourgeoisie in East Poland and the Baltic States. He had no difficulty in equating the resulting societies with the USSR in their essential class character. Capitalism in these local areas was replaced by the Stalinized post-capitalist system as a by-product of a reactionary strategy of collusion with fascist imperialism. These new "workers' states" had not 'degenerated'—they were degenerate from birth, or in his term, 'deformed'.

Does this invalidate the principle that workers' revolution is necessary to abolish capitalism? No. The overturn of capitalism in Eastern Europe was carried out by a state whose *class character* was determined by the 1917 revolution—its property relations remaining irreconcilable with capitalism. The bureaucracy's existence depends upon the existence of those anti-capitalist property forms. Stalinism could not co-exist for long with capitalism within its own borders. It certainly could not share power with a *bourgeoisie* which would act as an imperialist agent for the destruction of the Stalinist bureaucracy! In 1939 it could not co-exist with a ruling bourgeoisie within its newly extended eastern borders. Capitalism was thus *locally* overturned *bureaucratically* by the bureaucracy of a *workers' state* but as part of an overall reactionary strategy.

A bureaucratically degenerated workers' state such as the USSR could certainly never create a *healthy* workers' state anywhere—that would be suicide for the general interests of the bureaucracy! After 1947 their *first* concern while abolishing capitalism in eastern Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary etc. was to take away all independent initiative from the workers' organisations.

The Marxist principle of workers' revolution against capitalism is a *general* principle for the working class which, in this century, exists in *world-wide* economic interdependence. However, the general principle may be partially contradicted at local level by forces acting on a global scale.

Stalin's reactionary global struggle for peaceful co-existence with imperialism 1944-48 required him to crush or betray workers' revolution everywhere. In return he pleaded, in vain, for Imperialist agreement to neutralise the countries of his European Buffer Zone.

Soon it became a matter of survival for the bureaucracy to prevent imperialist penetration of the region. Hence their cold liquidation from above of the Eastern European capitalists and the replacement of the bourgeois governments with bureaucratic Stalinist governments. Out of such a *counter-revolutionary* global strategy there were created, as a by-product, post-capitalist societies which Trotskyists defend against imperialism in the same way as they would defend the USSR against imperialism—while fighting for workers' revolution within them.

Capitalism without the market?

SWM tells us that what is happening in the Stalinist societies is that only the form of capitalism is being changed by re-introducing the *market*.

Marx's understanding rules out any self-sustaining form of *capitalism* in which the *market* does not dominate society, acting blindly to exchange commodities, money, capital and labour. Even within his own party, Cliff's theory has been fundamentally challenged by theoretician Alex Callinicos who insisted that for Russia to be 'state-capitalist' it had to be centrally based on some such mechanisms of exchange—for which he never produced the evidence!

Market measures, even of a limited kind, in Yugoslavia, Hungary and then in the USSR proved incompatible with a system in which resources were allocated according to material targets and not the profit motive.

In China where market mechanisms continue to give rise to gigantic contradictions the bureaucracy has only been able to survive by uniting in savage reaction against the movement for democratic rights as in Tiananmen Square.

When Gorbachev attempted, after 40 years, to re-create a neutral zone in Eastern Europe, i.e. to free Poland, East Germany etc. from control by the USSR, resistance by the local bureaucratic castes to mass aspirations for democracy became futile. One after another they collapsed into factions competing for whatever pace and form of capitalist restoration was most favourable to each sectional interest.

The actual restoration of capitalism now looms as a major danger in all the Stalinist states unless the working class can create a new revolutionary movement to take hold of the nationalised economies and organise them under a plan controlled by the producers and consumers. The enormous difficulties now looming in actually creating a functioning markets in capital, labour and other commodities underline the inherent opposition and incompatibility of the Stalinist economic systems with any form of capitalism.

No need to fear the consequences?

SWM says it does not advocate the re-introduction of the *market* in the Stalinist societies but also that there is no reason to fear it because, in their view, those economies were already a part of world capitalism.

Far from being indifferent to this outcome, socialists must fear it as a potential tragedy on a historic scale. In terms of markets, vast reserves of cheap educated labour, and the knock-down prices at which existing enterprises are offered for sale, a huge boost to capital accumulation and a vast extension of the capitalist system may be the outcome. Not only would it reduce most of these states to quite backward semi-colonies of EC, US and Japanese capitalism, it could also give a vast new lease of life to international capitalism as a whole.

Cliff's theory of "state-capitalism" disarms socialists in the face of this historic danger.

Communism is Dead?

In September 1991 SWM called a public meeting in Dublin to celebrate "Good Riddance to Stalinism", a month after the failed coup in Moscow. It was an occasion for SWM leaders and members to hammer home their simple "sound bite" message—Tony Cliff's analysis has been proven right, as against everyone else on the left: Russia wasn't socialist'. As always, they were determined to avoid debating Trotsky's understanding of the USSR as decidedly *not* socialist, but as nevertheless a degenerate workers' state.

A member of the IWG who asked to speak in the "open discussion" in defence of Trotsky's explanation of Stalinism was physically thrown out of the room. (SWM's action was later publicly condemned in written statements by both *Militant* and Anarchists present, over a dozen having walked out in protest. SWM leaders refused to apologise—or justify their action.)

Forty years on from Cliff's surrender to Cold War anti-communist pressures, they continue to recoil from the *scientific* facts of the historic differences between a capitalist society and one which, although barbarously degenerate, has not restored capitalism.

The collapse of Stalinism has momentarily enthused the ranks of these centrists brought up on a diet of simplicities and ignorant of Marxist political economy.

Only four decades ago Cliff's theory proceeded from the belief that the Stalinist bureaucracy had proven its longevity as a new class, as an integral necessary part of the mode of production of a 'state-capitalist' economy.

But the *suicide* of the Stalinist bureaucracy after so short a historic period contradicts that assumption. Rather, it vindicates Trotsky's understanding of the bureaucracy as simply a caste, a parasite in a post-capitalist society, fundamentally illegitimate and sustaining a regime that was not historically stable but permanently in crisis. Either the living organism of the degenerated workers state would reject the parasite or...

the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers' state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back into capitalism. (L. Trotsky, *The Transitional Programme for Socialist Revolution*.)

SWM's theoretical confusion on these questions cannot excuse, however, the shameful programmatic positions they have taken up during a decade of Stalinist collapse. Their response to the *Solidarnosc* challenge to Polish Stalinism was to urge a programme of unashamed *reformism*. The ignominious withdrawal of the Stalinist armed forces from Afghanistan was turned by SWM into a *celebration* of the Mullah-led CIA-backed feudalists who, both before and after the USSR's invasion, were in open *reactionary* civil war against the Kabul regime.

Ugliest of all was SWM's *positive advocacy* of national movements to rise up against and break up the USSR, repeated by its leaders at public meetings. It is one thing to recognise the right of self determination of national movements which have already persuaded the mass of workers to see national secession as the solution to real social oppression. But even if it were legitimate to equate the Eastern Bloc with capitalist imperialism as two 'empires', it would still be inexcusable for Marxists to *positively advocate* national movements to break up the Eastern Bloc regimes. Reactionary civil wars as in Yugoslavia and the break-up of important working class links across huge regions are the disastrous consequences of going down such a road—a major set-back for the class struggle internationally.

Believing that the USSR is merely changing its style of capitalism, SWM disdains to admit that there are any distinct gains to be defended in the former Stalinist societies. It is criminally indifferent to the vital task of fighting for defence of nationalised property, central wages funds, guaranteed employment and the central allocation of productive resources. Since the end of the Berlin Wall precisely these issues have been central to any revolutionary programme of action for workers throughout the former USSR and COMECON.

"Communism is Dead" declared *Socialist Worker* front pages in Britain and Ireland after the August coup in Moscow in 1991—not 'Stalinism' but *communism*, and not even in quotes. SWM leaders went further, declaring at public meetings and even in their own letter columns, that perhaps the time has come to *abandon the term communist*. Could there be a clearer confession of where this political current really stands: not for the defence and re-building of revolutionary communism, nor in the camp of reformism, but always striving to stand in the *centre*, zig-zagging between the two.



Centrist Socialism or Revolutionary Communism?

In Ireland, all the centrist 'Trotskyists' uncritically adopted the legacy of James Connolly, pressing it into service as justification of their various, and conflicting, programmes. SWM particularly emphasised Connolly's syndicalism as healthy, and wrongly claimed that he had linked national and class struggle in a way that anticipated Trotsky's understanding of 'permanent revolution'. They even held him up as a champion of women against their oppression despite his pronounced backwardness on the family, church and state and sexual emancipation.

National ideological limits

Before the 1980s no root-and-branch Marxist critique of Connolly or his legacy was ever undertaken in Ireland and the myths and confusions of Connollyism were perpetuated by hagiographers, left nationalists and Stalinists.

In 1982, for the first time such a critique of Irish revolutionary traditions was undertaken by the IWG as an essential aspect of creating a genuine revolutionary communism in Ireland, a task which Connolly himself attempted, but in a deeply flawed way. The fruits of the IWG's work on Connolly was published in *Class Struggle* journal in a series of eight major articles up to 1987.

SWM, by contrast, just like *Militant* and the Peoples Democracy (USFI), continued to turn out occasional features on the inspirational legacy of Connolly, citing those aspects of his heroic struggles which suited their particular programmes, just as did every reformist, Stalinist and left republican in Ireland. That is, until they began to take account of the ground-breaking analysis under publication by the IWG.

As late as 1986, *Socialist Worker* carried articles indicating no critical development whatever in SWM's attitude to Connolly, but in the year after the *Class Struggle* series was completed, Kieran Allen's introduction to Connolly's *Labour in Irish History*, revealed for the first time a critical approach to Connolly's ideas—along the lines published by the IWG.

Early in 1990 the IWG re-edited its articles as a book—*Connolly: A Marxist Analysis* by A. Johnston et al. Within months SWM launched a book on Connolly by Kieran Allen, begun in 1987 which borrowed lock stock and barrel the radical new analysis of Connolly's republican socialism from the IWG's articles *without acknowledgement*.

Introducing his own work, Allen states that "it be-hoves any new book on Connolly to situate itself in relation to the vast bulk of literature that has been written about him", yet nowhere in it is there the slightest reference to the most substantial critical Marxist analysis of Connolly previously published—the series in *Class Struggle*, now in book form. This was despite extensive refer-

ences to many slight and barely relevant writings by 'left' authors on Connolly.

This act of plagiarism did not escape independent reviewers. For example the left-Stalinist paper in Britain, the *Leninist*, reviewing both books, independently concluded:

Both are worthwhile contributions to a critical understanding of Connolly, in particular the IWG publication, which is based on a series of incisive articles in the *Journal Class Struggle* back in 1984; articles which Allen seems to have used in his appraisal. (p. 7, 28 June 1990).

Allen's book is, of course, a political biography and covers many areas of Connolly's activity not discussed in the IWG work. The IWG's paper was the *only* one to give Allen's book a serious and extended review—too long to summarise here. While recognising the merits of his book the review also locates a central problem with its method.

Despite his borrowing of the essential critical framework of the IWG work, Allen's more extensive discussions, especially of Connolly's syndicalism and experience of party-building, ironically fall back once more into *borrowing the mantle of Connolly* to justify the specific features of SWM's own project.

SWM's portrayal of Connolly, especially on the national question and his break with reformism, reflects all too accurately basic similarities with their own centrist confusions and sectarianism. Both share a method that has no means of linking the immediate day-to-day issues with the practical struggle for socialism.

The profound difference is that Connolly was grasping for new answers to new problems. SWM, sadly, has been steadily ditching the revolutionary method so hard-won in revolutionary struggles which Connolly did not live to see.

What measure of success?

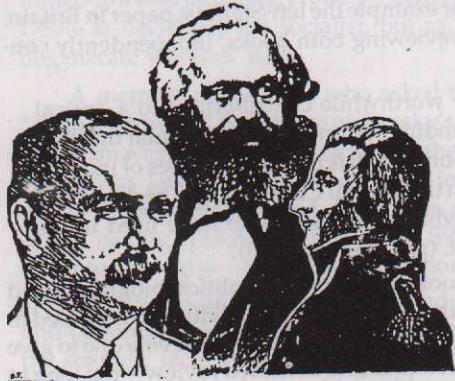
The Socialist Workers Movement, for the 20 years of its existence, has trained its members to ignore criticism and polemic against them from the left. That is especially so with regard to criticism from the Irish Workers Group whose leading members it has bureaucratically excluded from its "public" meetings.

Time and again, however, SWM leaders have found it impossible to stifle questions from its own members, from labour movement figures or from others it has wished to court. Shy of ever putting a critique of the IWG in print, its response has to be inferred from a limited stock of ritual jibes and a repertoire of whispered slanders. Oblivious to its own rejection by the major working class parties as a tiny sect on the fringes, it dismisses IWG's political criticisms as coming from... a tiny sect on the fringes.

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IRISH WORKERS GROUP

SWM believes itself to be "the main socialist organisation in Ireland" (SW, March '92, no. 82, p.9), having recently overtaken the *Militant Tendency*... by a dozen or two members. Yet its numbers remain less than 3% of the Labour Party's, and it has no base of working class support.

SWM claims 'success' as against smaller tendencies on the criterion of *numbers*. Since setting up with about 50 members, it has won and lost scores more, who have joined and left it again as if through a revolving door, to use Engels' phrase. It has attained the dizzy heights of about 150 members after 20 years, despite the advantage of a major organisation in Britain to support it. Such a turnover greatly facilitates collective amnesia about their own past and their twists and turns.

More significantly, at least three whole leaderships have abandoned SWM, many of them still active in public life as authors, journalists, trade unionists, women activists. This, in particular, underlines the *political stagnation* and degeneration of SWM.

SWM does not acknowledge in print in Ireland the existence of other competing groups equally claiming to offer a correct *revolutionary socialist* strategy and equally claiming the legacy of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and Connolly. Its would-be 'mass' paper presents a view of the left to the 'masses' which airbrushes out precisely what is most obvious to the masses whenever the far-left becomes visible—the plurality of *competing groups*.

The *failure* of the 'revolutionary' left for 40 years, however, is bound up in every way with these divisions. Organisationally, the divisions are a real obstacle. Politically, they express the confusion of theory among Marxists, and the degeneration of the revolutionary programme through sectarian and opportunist practice. Failure to address the roots of these divisions openly in debate and polemic is failure to address the *most important task* of revolutionaries today.

Yet SWM has never produced a theoretical journal during its 20 years. SWM public meetings, having attracted an audience of politically conscious militants, struggle to render the topic of the month in terms simple enough for an imagined mass audience, and then counterpose this ingratiating tone to the 'sectarian' attempt of rival tendencies to raise questions of theory, strategy and programme. Such an organisation can offer no answers to the crisis of Marxism.

Recreating Revolutionary Communism

The IWG has always made programmatic questions a priority. It cannot claim the 'success' of SWM in numbers; but its *political* gains have been out of all proportion to its tiny resources. Even so, the IWG has consistently intervened in all key struggles, attempting to give a revolutionary lead, to a far greater extent than SWM in proportion to resources, SWM's slanders notwithstanding.

The IWG has carried out, in international collaboration, major tasks towards restating the communist programme for our time. Nor has this been an 'academic' exercise—as SWM regards theoretical and programmatic work. It has been done *in struggle* with other political

tendencies. Our programme, theses and resolutions on key issues for Marxists today have been worked out through engagement with the concrete living struggles of the working class and oppressed world-wide—understanding the post-war world of Stalinism and imperialism, restating the communist tradition on reformism, advancing the programmes of communism for the racially and sexually oppressed, and confronting the major struggles of the masses, month-to-month, from the Portuguese Revolution, through the momentous struggles in the Middle East and South Africa to the political-revolutionary crises in the Stalinist world.

Our positions have gained from and been put to the test of debate against the programmes of all the different centrist currents claiming the legacy of the Bolsheviks and Trotsky. That is one of the main strengths of our political and programmatic capital.

Nor are these mainly literary gains. Our programmatic and theoretical work has been forced forward by the struggle to actually organise a coherent international tendency, with an international leadership guided by regular international executive meetings, with perspectives worked out by democratic international congresses—the *League for a Revolutionary Communist International*. The LRCI began from collaboration between the IWG and Workers Power (Britain) and now counts organised supporters, including eight national organisations, in Latin America, New Zealand and across Europe, with regular publications in English, Spanish, French, German and Russian, and a number in Italian, Hungarian, Slovenian, Serbo-Croat and Turkish.

The creation of the LRCI, organisationally and politically, has taken 15 years of struggle and, we believe, will count for far more in creating a revolutionary movement than all the claimed numerical growth of tendencies such as the Cliffites who have significantly degenerated in their politics.

The Destination of Centrism

It is entirely possible that a group such as SWM might grow and become a factor in the political situation. Growth in numbers, however, and even the winning of significant support does not prove the 'correctness' of a group's politics when the result is to build on an opportunist basis. The much larger Cliffite tendency in Britain, the SWP, has shown in several major campaigns, around the Gulf War, the fight against Fascism etc., precisely such opportunist appetites for growth at the price of accommodating to left-reformism and the petit-bourgeoisie.

Centrist currents can become a real force among the masses, but in doing so they become a *major obstacle* in a situations of class struggle and revolutionary potential. The historic example of such an outcome in the period of Trotsky's struggle for a new International was the centrist POUM in Spain. This party became a significant force among the Spanish masses during in the revolutionary situation of 1931-37 which culminated in the tragic smashing of the proletariat in the Civil War. It emerged from the manoeuvres of leading revolutionaries who had at first supported the *International Left Opposition*.

Trotsky persistently criticised the methods of the leaders of the Left Opposition in Spain as it began to make rapid organisational gains after 1931. He specifically attacked its tendency always to *accommodate* to surrounding radical currents, *adapting* its operative programme to non-revolutionary forces. He disagreed strongly with their opportunist methods of party-building. They failed especially to participate seriously in the collective *international* debates and struggles on questions of perspective, programme and strategy. On this Trotsky had profound misgivings towards them. For him the key to creating a revolutionary leadership was full involvement in political internationalism. In their eyes, Trotsky was pedantic and unrealistic, a belief refuted by their own fate.

The Spanish leaders' opportunist tendency was consummated in the foundation of the POUM in 1935. Trotsky's final judgement on the POUM was that in *verbally* proposing revolutionary solutions to the Spanish crisis while hesitating to take the decisive action to put them into practice, it acted as the *principal* road-block to the formation of a mass revolutionary socialist party in Spain, with terrible consequences.

The POUM is an object lesson in understanding currents such as SWM and SWP. Indeed, it shares important features with the SWP. Its leaders had broken from Trotskyism. It constructed its politics on the national terrain, systematically ignoring the primacy of the fight to develop an International and its programme. And it elevated the spontaneity of the masses as the touchstone of its politics, inevitably yielding to the pressures of opportunism. So it fell in line with the Stalinist-guided Republican government which turned on it when it was vulnerable, killed the leaders and smashed the organisation. Despite their intentions the leaders of the POUM had helped lead the vanguard of Spanish workers to defeat.

The fate of the POUM is a tragic warning of the need to identify centrism and openly fight it. We seek to win over the revolutionary individuals from its ranks to the fight for a new Leninist Trotskyist international party committed to working class revolution for socialism in Ireland and world wide.



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